Dark side of the Stage

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/72644331.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warnings:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Major Character Death
Fandom:	Deltarune (Video Game)
Relationships:	Battat (Deltarune)/Reader, Small Mike (Deltarune)/Reader
Characters:	Small Mike (Deltarune), Tenna (Deltarune), Battat (Deltarune), Pluey (Deltarune), Jongler (Deltarune), Mike Trio (Deltarune), minor ocs here and there
Additional Tags:	You know the drill you're a pippins when youre with me, pippins reader, Kind of enemies to lovers, Other characters will appear, Tags will be added, Allusions to drinking and gambling, all that have fun, Forced Proximity, Toxic workplace enviornment, Things will get scary actually sorry, Horror AND Romance, eventual smut (?), Hurt / Comfort, I should've updated these tags WAY sooner lol!
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-10-17 Words: 50,322 Chapters: 14/?

Dark side of the Stage

by Battatat

Summary

You're a troublesome Pippins, under your coworkers watchful glare. He frustrates you to no end - smarmy, snarky, cold. Now you're forced to live with him after causing a huge accident at work. Will you ever get along?

(So, this is slowly turning into a horror / romance. Have fun with that!)

Chapter 1

You were no different from the other Pippinses.

A mischevious die, up to no good - kind, but not nice. You joined the gambling, the drinking, the raunchy parties after work, you were every much a troublemaker as your peers. You enjoyed it, though. You had a sense of belonging. You in particular were a shoplifter - petty crimes, funny to your peers, leaving cheap Tenna plushes and pins around TV World much to your boss' ire.

The CRT would storm out sometimes, demanding who the culprit is - sometimes, he'd even try to lure you in with, "I won't be mad, I promise". Too bad you enjoyed seeing him mad - steam coming from the vents at the side of his head, face flushed, fangs out... oh, you certainly enjoyed that.

The other darkners normally behaved, out of the unsubstantiated fear that Tenna could see through every screen in TV world - only the Pippinses knew that wasn't true. We knew better, you'd think, sneaking into secret rooms with friends. Stealing points, smokes, shot glasses, trading them like cards. It brought some spice to your life.

Once upon a time, you'd believed the rumours of the Lord of the Screens seeing through all screens here. Screens were everywhere - in the Green Room, in every hallway, in every corridor - there was even corridors with stacks upon stacks upon stacks of screens, forever playing, constantly looping overwhelming visuals of different channels, all at once. This place was a visual nightmare, sometimes. The cafeteria had two, as well. To your relief they at least stuck to a sports channel. You didn't even care about sports. It was just the consistency you appreciated.

You and the other Pippinses were good folks - compassionate when necessary, sometimes your "mischief" was just to help others - even if it meant stealing medicine to leave for sick coworkers, or rigging the vending machine to leave a free drink for the next guy. Sometimes it was just the thrill. Pippinses faced the most abuse here - lower pay, Mike was always down your throats, Zappers were instructed to "keep an eye" on the Pippinses. The Pippinses had to work harder just to not even get a raise, but be called "one of the good ones". You'd learned to not take it too personally, but it was annoying enough that none of you really cared about trying to be particularly good anymore. One Pippins befriended a Zapper, much to your peers' shock. And even she had to keep getting bailed out by the Zapper who'd decided she loved the Pippins. They had some cute romance going on, though, so you rooted for the girls.

But there was one Pippins who went above and beyond to be "perfect". Late twenties or early thirties, most certainly. He was smarmy and rude, always sucking up to Tenna. He isolated himself from the others - whether he thought he was above you or not was unknown to you, but it only really irked you when he'd bark at you for texting on the job. Or screwing around playing the no-connection-dinosaur-game on the computers (to which, you'd combatted him with, "fix the connection, then, dude?"). He'd roll his eyes dramatically. He was overbearingly serious. You'd bet money on him having no sense of humour. Even when he

was sucking up to Tenna, he'd only force out little laughs for the boss, just to walk away looking strangely more irate. He was an oddball.

He was a foresty green, standing out among your kind. He was pretty, really - it was unanimously agreed among your peers. He was a bit taller (only a bit), lankier. Cold green eyes, with a matching evergreen cloak, tie and gloves. His voice had an awkward tilt to it, you weren't sure if that was just his attitude or some weird speech pattern. You were certain he smoked or something - he had a nasty cough. He could sometimes be seen talking to a Shadowguy or Zapper, but almost never another Pippins unless he was scolding one of you. He effortlessly ignored the advances of others, seemingly oblivious to his rare colour making him attractive. But that attractiveness was soured by the fact he lived with a scowl on his face, submerged in paperwork, coffee, accompanied by an ever bouncing leg.

It drove you mad.

You'd tried to win his friendship, really. None of the others tried, because they'd already been turned down so much. He never showed to parties - not even alcohol free pizza parties. He never showed up to movie nights or game nights, he never sat with the other Pippinses. Was he some kind of self loathing oddball?

He really was meant to be some snobby butler or something, he'd probably snag that role if Mike didn't fill it for him. He always looked tired and overworked, and you'd have felt bad for him if he wasn't a jerk about it.

Whenever you had shared shifts, you'd bring him a drink.

"Just better to tolerate a long day with one," you'd explain as you handed him a coffee.

You knew his order.

1 milk, 2 sugar, he preferred dark roast, but occasionally switched it up for hazelnut.

You also knew his favourite soda.

It was a carbonated strawberry lemonade.

You also knew his favourite snacks - he liked anything with peanut butter or chocolate. But you'd seen him sneak a jar of pickles into the lunch hall as his sole meal, plucking them out with a lengthy toothpick so he didn't have to get his gloves wet with picklejuice, as he honed in on paperwork. What a drag of a man, you thought. Your jaw had dropped when he spiced it up with pickled eggs.

"Such a weird guy," your friend muttered beside you, a fellow red Pippins. "He could just be chill and hang out with us. He doesn't gotta sit out like that."

Rye, your friend, tapped his claws on the table. He'd finished his burrito while you'd left your quesadilla half eaten. You still fully intended to finish it, but the clock was ticking and you had been busy angrily studying that green loser.

"If you're not gonna eat that..."

"Ugh. I will. I'll be quick about it. I was just lost in thought." You picked up a slice and resumed eating, eyes still locked on the green idiot still meticulously eating eggs off a toothpick.

Rye snorted a laugh through his nose. "Yeah, sure. I don't think he'd give you the time of day."

"It's not that," you responded, mouth still half-full. "I just don't understand him."

"Don't think anyone does," Rye hummed patiently. "I tried talkin' to him once and he just wanted me to go away. None of us are mean to him, dunno what the deal is. I can tell it bugs ya, though."

"It does," you swallowed, took another bite, and resumed speaking with a gloved hand covering your mouth. "I share a lotta shifts with him, so it'd make my life easier to just. Get along! But he hates everyone."

Rye smiled sympathetically. "If anyone can, I'm sure it'll be you. You'll crack him someday."

"Hopefully soon," you groaned. "He only likes me when I bring him something to eat or drink. Then the next day he hates me again."

Rye met you with a comforting pat on the shoulder.

He was really your best friend. A red Pippins with a crack on his forehead, but softspoken and relaxed. He was killer at poker, and had a scarily high tolerance for alcohol, but was usually the one breaking up bar fights. You often shadowed him when off the clock. He was something like a much older brother to you than he was anything else.

"Lunch is over," he said coolly. "Time for work. See ya, buddy."

"See ya," you mumbled back, eyes drifting back to him.

Of course, you were working with Battat that day. You were often paired together - a troublemaker with a goody two-shoes. You supposed it put Tenna and Mike's minds at ease. You weren't as bad as some of the others, though - you never showed up drunk, you didn't smoke or show up high. At worst, you'd slack off a bit and text friends when on the clock. You saved all your mischief for your off hours - but it was no matter. Battat still eyed you like you were a wanted criminal.

Today was gonna suck. You both had to clean the entire backstage, top to bottom, because it was gonna be in use again.

You bought two drinks at the vending machine before rolling out: a peach energy drink, and a carbonated strawberry lemonade. You sighed and made your way to the broom closet.

He'd been impatiently tapping his foot outside the closet, arms crossed, waiting for you.

"You're late-"

"Gotcha this." You shut him up by handing the strawberry lemonade over.

He halted and seemed almost perplexed, then suspicious. "Thank... you...?"

"I paid for it," you muttered. "No need to look at me like that."

"Okay, okay. Thanks." He seemed embarassed now. Good.

You only responded with an indifferent mhmm. You wanted to get along with him, really. You thought about it a lot. But you didn't know how to brute force past his sneery attitude.

He huffed and opened the door. You both wasted no time grabbing a mop, a broom and dustpan, a bucket, sponges and soaps to haul to the backstage room. He pocketed a microfiber. When you'd gathered the supplies, he simply beckoned with his finger for you to follow.

And so you did, spinning on your heel to follow him. Your heels clicked and his toes tapped down the hallway, the only sounds bouncing off the massive walls around you. You both were so tiny compared to this massive space. Not because you two were in any form short - by lightner standards, you'd probably be comfortably around the same height as the average human. You were normal. It was your fifteen foot tall boss that needed the place to be absolutely massive. Once in a while, you wondered if this is how cats feel around their owners homes. The other darkners here were, also, on the larger side. Shadowguys could range anywhere from seven to eight feet - the Zappers an easy ten feet all. Shuttahs were somewhere in between. Ribbicks, well... everyone avoided those nasty buggers. They were cute, for sure. But Pippinses did, in fact, like keeping their cloaks and gloves clean.

You finally made it to the backstage room.

It was a large room. A very large room.

Bleachers along one wall, black soundproof padding on the walls, with bulletins haphazardly pinned. Posters and signs on the one wall without soundproofing. There was a small storage closet and a dressing room. Tenna had a huge desk hauled in the corner. There was a whiteboard, too, for setting up groups and writing schedules. It felt like a massive classroom for theatre kids, really, but it was the type of thing Tenna was very into: forcing everyone to know how to perform. It worked, sadly. A lot of the darkners here had at least some kind of tolerance for being on stage. Be it surviving cooking or physical challenges, karaoke or music videos, broadway inspired productions, news segments, having to act in dramas, whatever Tenna felt like putting on a show for, everyone had to have at least a preference for something. You were fine with most things aside from physical challenges, really.

"I'll sweep and mop," you volunteered.

He peered at you from the corner of his eye before nodding. "I'll put stuff away, then."

"Do you care if I listen to music?" You suddenly asked.

"... If it's not terrible, why not."

And not another word was exchanged.

Fortunately for you, he didn't complain at all about the music you played. You decided not to scare him with punk or metal - you stuck to more quiet music. Sad songs, gentle love songs, whatever wasn't terribly loud but still kept a comfortable background noise. You were in your element when listening to music - there wasn't a speck of dust left on the floor when you were done sweeping, now to move on to mopping.

You quickly called out for him.

"Hm?" He stuck his head out of the storage closet.

"Gonna mop," you cautioned. "Be careful when you come back out."

He responded with just an awkward thumbs up before he continued his sorting.

You forgot he was in there, after a while. You shifted to cheesy 80s tunes.

You were getting... really into it.

Belting out tunes as you mopped the whole floor with expertise. Dancing with the mop, forgetting you weren't alone. You didn't notice him poke his head back out to watch the show.

You alternated between pretending the mop was your microphone, and your dance partner, not caring how shitty your dancing was - you were still doing your job, and well, at that. You hopped on the bleachers to keep your feet off the floor, shouting about believing in life after love as you scrubbed the floor. With a stroke of luck, you didn't even slip as you jumped back off.

Then the next song - a sorrowful ballad by a Swedish band. You belted whether or not you were out of tune, you just enjoyed the dramatic passion.

It was a blast, really. Your work went by effortlessly, at least to you.

He waited until the song was done, before making his presence known again.

You'd nearly lept out of your skin from how badly he scared you - your face immediately flushed. You'd already broken a bit of a sweat with all your dancing and powercleaning, now you'd just remembered he'd heard everything. Entirely your fault for forgetting.

He'd leaned against the storage room doorway, arms crossed, smirking at you.

"I think the floor's clean."

You frantically looked at your work.

He was right - it was spotless.

"Yessir... Yes it is."

"Having fun...?" He prompted.

You hung your head. "Yes."

He let out a stiff little laugh.

"Great. Because the place is shining. Didn't wanna... interrupt you, but we're done for the day, too."

You only squeezed out a weak squeak, before helping him gather up the cleaning supplies, watched as he quickly did an inventory check, and wordlessly followed him back to the broom closet.

Your face burned hot with embarassment. You'd still totally do that again, just ideally not while forgetting he was there.

Battat was a quick walker, much to your frustration - you had to lightly jog to keep up. But you didn't complain. Him commenting on not interrupting you was the closest he's gotten to friendly, so you had no intentions of potentially souring it. You wondered if he would ever join one of your dumb cleaning concerts, if he had a soul and actually enjoyed singing and dancing. If he enjoyed anything, actually. Battat had such a stiff personality, you'd have been shocked if he found organizing riveting. The burning curiosity what he was like behind his steel walls pricked at your mind, so much so that you almost slammed into his back when he stopped to open the closet door.

Again, you only wordlessly assisted in helping him put away the supplies - you'd emptied the bucket, put the sponges away, the soaps, put the broom and mop back where they belonged.

"See ya tomorrow," was all you said as you tried to walk away, before he caught you off guard.

"Next time," he began, "can you let me make a song request?"

You couldn't tell if he was mocking you or not. That bastard.

"Sure," you responded meekly anyway, yearning to know what the hell he'd say next.

"It's called enjoy the silence." He said simply, indifferently, before leaving with a small wave.

He had to be mocking you.

When you got home that night, after showering, downing a bowl of cereal, and putting on your loungewear, the curiosity burned you up inside.

So you looked up those three words. It sounded so familiar, it bothered you. You initially thought he was just cheekily telling you to shut up.

Huh.

It was a real song.

You stared blankly at your phone for admittedly much too long.

Chapter 2: Tumbling down

Chapter Summary

Youre gonna hate meeee

He was back to hating you the next day.

Unsurprisingly.

Cold, dismissive stares, his simple scowl, one word responses. Handwaves, "whatever"s, eye twitches.

You couldn't understand it, nor did you try. You just would try again at a peace offering, again and again, but you had no intentions of backing down against his scowls. You always met them with a fixed glower of your own, an annoyed huff from your nostrils. You refused to show it bothered you. It had to be some kind of self-loathing, you'd observed, since he didn't seem to care much for himself, either. But that was no excuse! You'd done nothing to earn his ire.

Nobody knew what his problem was, but you shifted uncomfortably anytime he so much as scanned the room with his usual irritated glare.

It was a long morning. Lots of technical errors causing Tenna's broadcast to go a bit awry. Nothing the crew couldn't fix, but enough that Tenna was particularly angry today. He tried to play it cool, but it was clear the CRT was not having a good morning. Mike stood by in feline form, occasionally pawing at Tenna's side to calm him down. Tenna grumbled something about his wires needing adjusting, leading you to assume he was part of the technical difficulties. It all made for a very uncomfortable work environment - the boss was passive aggressive, and everyone was working harder to please him.

He really wasn't a bad guy. He was just a bad boss. And it bled into everything workplace related. Really, though, you did like him. He could be charming, dorky, funny. Tenna had a show stopping smile you were certain most Pippinses melted under in the right conditions, you all just liked to generally get a rise out of him, not even with the intent of actually causing him any real distress, just mild annoyance. His fangs, claws, steamed vents were a thriller - and Pippinses loved a thrill. Everyone agreed they liked him more when he wasn't stressed out before or after broadcasts, or fretting too much about the Dreemurrs and "that mailman", but such things were out of your control. All employees could do was try to keep his mind off his woes. It was an unspoken rule among the Pippinses, even: stupid little pranks were fine, but nothing to cause real distress to the boss. Underneath it all, you still liked him.

Working cameras today, you were experiencing the least issues. Though, really, the camera you were holding was maybe the only one cooperating. Another's battery died, the other's sound was malfunctioning. Tenna's microphone malfunctioned as well, causing the loud feedback to hurt everyone's ears. Orders were being barked around by Battat, who seemed to declare himself in charge as Tenna tapped his foot impatiently. Battat was clearly irate: speaking loudly and quickly, large arm movements to charade commands to the Shadowguys working in the control booth. He waved his clipboard around with exaggerated impatience. It was a disaster morning.

Lunch couldn't come sooner.

You made a breakaway faster than what was necessary. Gently putting down the camera, making sure it was no longer recording, and booked it. You'd be in editing all day after lunch, which would be a much smoother afternoon. Then you could clock out at six and let the night crew take over.

You entered the cafeteria and made your way to the Pippins running the caf, throwing your weight on the counter.

"Long day?" He asked, resting on one arm.

"Real nightmare out there," you laughed, picking yourself back up.

"Hmph," he snorted coolly. "Well, we're having an all-day breakfast special. Maybe that'll pick you up." The Pippins slid you a small laminated paper.

"Ugh, please. I'll haveee..." you mused the menu he gave you. "Number two, scrambled eggs, with homefries and sausage."

"And to drink?"

"Ginger ale," you flashed him a sweet smile, and slid him fifteen points.

You stood around idly as he prepared your meal, scanning lazily for Rye or any of your friends. You could spot Rye the easiest - his cracked skull, while mostly on the forehead, and bulkier frame made it easier to pick him our in a crowd. True as ever, he had his back to you, sitting with a few other larger Pippinses.

Larger was speaking a bit generously - all Pippinses were very similar in height, only varying by roughly eight inches, never a foot or more apart. Pippinses also often shared similar builds, some being chubbier or skinnier than the others. It was "fashionable" to make yourself different: so some wore pins, bowties, glasses, some wore fancier coats, some wore combat boots or heels, and others wore black sneakers over the typical loafers. You wore knock offs of a popular branded boot to look stylish without wasting points, and kept your coat just a bit more rough around the edges than the others, and wore black gloves. Small details, but in a crowd, nobody could pick you out. And that was the goal - Pippinses liked trying to look different, but not too different, because still resembling each other was a group effort for easily escaping trouble.

Originally, none of you even had names. Just numbers. After Tenna showed up and created TV world, it only took a few months of his reign for you all to unanimously agree to give yourself names: having an identity was nice.

As you made your way to Rye, he looked over his shoulder and caught sight of you. The larger Pippins adjusted himself so you could slink into the seat beside him easily.

"Hey bud." He gave you a soft smile. "How's stage shift goin?"

"Terrible," you laughed. "Greenie's gonna blow a gasket one of these days. Pretty sure if he could kill, he would."

Rye chuckled, his voice a low and steady rumble. "I'm sure he's killed before. What was goin' on?"

"Tech issues," you hummed as you dug into your eggs. "Everything was going wrong. I'm in editing after this, so not my problem."

Rye chewed carefully on his omelette. "You prefer editing, dontcha?"

"Beats running around everyone during broadcasts," you chomped down on a sausage. "Sound and editing feel a bit more chill. And it also beats paperwork."

"Sure does." Rye was a Pippins of few words. He always showed curiosity in your day, chatted a little, and awkwardly moved along. You used to worry that you annoyed him until you learnt that was just... how he was. If he spoke more, it'd be worth worrying about.

You tuned into the ongoing conversation.

"I just think the production value in her music has decreased. And she's a lazy songwriter." A Pippins a few seats down commented.

"What do you mean? She's at the top of all the charts?" Disbelief from a Pippins you couldn't see.

"Charts doesn't equal good," a third weighed in. "Most mainstream pop is kind of garbage."

"Oh right, you only listen to intelligent music? By guys with only 30 listeners?"

"I just think mainstream is low valu-"

"Shut up, dude."

"I agree, actually, nobody even likes your playlists man."

"Oh look at me, I only listen to Intelligent Music for Big Brains. I'm Also A Pippins Who Cheated On His Girlfriend," another mocked.

"I don't know what relevance that has," the Pippins stiffly defended himself.

"It means we don't care, dude."

Rye leaned towards you with a low chuckle. "They've been at this for fifteen minutes now."

"What provoked this?" You whispered.

"... don't really know," Rye chewed. "It's kinda entertaining."

You snorted a laugh through your nostrils and continued eavesdropping.

When lunch was over, you made your way down the hallway, but instead of going to the stages, you went to the room across the hallway: the computer lab.

It was Tenna's least favourite room, so he never came in. But it was where the magic was really made - at most it was usually only two or three employees at the desks, editing the day's footage, adjusting audio, colour grading, adding effects. Usually, only a small handful of darkners milled about. If Mike wasn't such a jerk, you'd have asked ages ago to be primarily working in here instead of being made to do different jobs per shift. Your weekly schedules made your head spin - "but it's to keep employees from feeling like they do the same thing every day" as the miserable excuse for why nobody worked the same shift for more than two days.

Which, in and of itself, was equally miserable.

You eagerly sat down at the computer, and fired up the editing program.

"I'll send everyone the footage from today," a Pippins hummed as he sat at the front with a laptop. "Log into your respective work emails and the files will be there in a couple minutes..."

Fortunately, you were adept with editing.

You were done in only a couple hours - the fruits of your labour affording you your own computer time, headphones on. With a satisfied smirk, you flicked through music videos, losing track of time.

You practically skipped out of the room when your shift was done - pleased with yourself for always being the quickest to submit your work so you could go back to music. Sultry, gothic, rock, pop, whatever, it all appealed to you. Computers were an incredibly reluctant necessity of TV World - Tenna avoided them as much as possible, as if they were poison, but of course they were needed to stitch together his shows. He was kind of ridiculous, and the reasoning for this behaviour evaded you. He sometimes feigned interest in wanting to learn the basics, such as how to write emails, only to never commit. He wouldn't even take up Mike on the offer, you'd learnt, from a particularly firey day several months back.

You made it to the Green Room - the Green Room was essentially just the main lobby. All the different corridors were connected through here, including the hallway that lead to the

elevators to all the different stores, restaurants, and residential housing in the TV World building. It was a behemoth, really.

You made your way into the ranked rooms - you had one goal in mind.

The vending machine.

You pulled out the oldest trick in the book: a single point coin, with a hole in it, wrapped nicely in a string. You smugly paid for your own drink, and then for another, leaving the extra can behind.

You only did this in the ranked room - there were no cameras, and less eyes. The main frequenters were Pippinses - and nobody messed with the Watercooler in their respective room. You slipped back out, unnoticed.

Boredom tickled your skin incessantly. Like it was an itch you needed to scratch. But you didn't know what to do about it - nothing came to mind, nothing enticed you. You got your free drink, and wandered aimlessly.

Wandering aimlessly, you found yourself in the hallway with rows upon rows upon rows of televisions, all running different channels. It had to be a maze of just televisions - twists, turns, constant noise. It was easy to get lost, or trip. There was no real supporting walls. Just televisions.

It was a sensory nightmare for you.

You treaded through the maze, not even sure why you were here. Your skin began to prickle with discomfort at the barrage of sounds and visuals, but still you walked through - you didn't actually know the maze by heart.

The robotic sounds of a Zapper made you pick up your pace. You weren't looking for confrontation just to wander around. But the sounds seemed to get closer, and quicker - it's loud, robotic hops, irregular electronic beeping as it detected something that shouldn't be there: you.

Now, you wouldn't have gotten maybe more than a scolding for wandering around after hours back here. Pippinses were known for breaking into the secret rooms here, including ones important to Tenna. While it wasn't really a rule, Pippins weren't supposed to be unsupervised here. And if they were, they'd be escorted out. But Zappers weren't supposed to be friendly with you. So the escort would, typically, not be very pleasant. Nothing horrible, but nothing pleasant either, unless it was one of the two Zappers who were nicer to Pippinses. By the sounds of their heavy thumps, this was not one of those two.

And you didn't really want any of that nonsense, now did you?

You picked up your pace, sprinting unevenly.

The Zapper's beeping turned into a siren.

Your heartbeat quickened.

You got sloppier as you began scrambling around corners, praying to any higher power that your little legs can get you out of this needless pursuit. The sound of your heart hammered in your eardrums, threatening to burst with each pump.

Running aimlessly and struggling to remember where you came from, you'd quickly shifted from nervousness to anxiety to a full on panic due to your pursuer. Thoughts and reason began to evade you as fight or flight kicked in. All you cared about was getting away. You'd lost track of how to get out.

Then, the unthinkable happened.

You tripped.

You desperately grabbed onto one of those dumb golden Tenna statues that lined every hallway, praying you could catch yourself. You'd never actually touched one before - but you assumed it was rooted to the floor. It was a horrible miscalculation. They were, to your horror, not rooted to the floor. It tumbled with you, and ended up causing you to swing and fall into one of the televisions.

The screen shattered - it shook, and the televisions stacked on top wobbled from the force of your body.

The entire row only needed the force of one clumsy, terrified Pippins flying into the one of the televisions to cause an avalanche of screens, cascading down in error sounds and the sounds of shattering glass and plastic. Sparks flew. You couldn't scream - the sight of the tidal wave of televisions coming down over you unlocked a primal fear in you, you couldn't react, only stare in fear of your impeding doom.

A red hand shot out, and pulled you out right before a television could execute you.

"Oh... yous in it now, little guy." The Zapper buzzed. Its robotic arm shifted to hold you against its side like a basketball. "Can't remember the last time somethin' this scale ruined the place... That wasn't the boss," it laughed. Its thick accent and cold body sent chills down your spine.

All you could do was breathe shallow gasps, too stunned to register anything else.

Chapter 3: Punishment

Chapter Summary

Forgive me for typos. I'm half asleep. My beta reader is just a cat dude!!!

But I wanted to follow up with 2 updates today, both very plot heavy, as to not leave yall on a cliffhanger.

My chapters here are so far very short and heavily packed, but they'll slow and become a bit longer again after this point!

Also we have A NAME THIS TIME... I just hate doing "Y/N" so I'd rather just let characters give us nicknames, usually. Or just go hard or go home: name or no name. You're free to substitute "Cardinal" with whatever name you prefer, of course.

"It was an accident, sir."

Your voice came out weak, submissive, trembling.

Tenna's imposing form shadowed over you - he was furious. It was easy for him to snap his fingers and fix the destruction, but it was another thing to deal with the culprit. His form felt nearly twice his normal size - you felt as small as an ant under the stark white light he shown down on you.

You'd expected a black screen, maybe raised voices from him, but this felt far worse. His office was dark, quiet, Mike standing by silently. He hadn't said a word. Tenna's screen was white and featureless - acting like a spotlight in his interrogation. His voice was eerily calm, but you knew he was furious.

"You're a liability," he stated, fingers entertwined as he rested his massive head on them. "What am I to do with you?"

"I'm sorry." You shrunk more. "I'll accept whatever punishment. I'm sorry. I have no excuse."

You got down on your knees, and pressed your forehead to the floor - an act of submission.

"Well, I can't trust you to even walk around by yourself," Tenna mused. "And I don't want to fire you..." he reached a long, slender finger down to lift your head. He examined your fearful eyes carefully.

His screen was blinding. You were already trembling, but the physical contact worsened your tremors.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Concern inched through his anger. All it took was one look at the fear on your face for his demeanour to soften, even if a little.

He leaned back, pulling away his hand. He stared at Mike, then you. He sat in silence for a long time, the thick air of tension threatening to churn your stomach and its contents.

"I'll require you to be constantly supervised," he decided, dusting his hands. "Twenty fouuur seven. For how long, I don't know. I'll decide when I trust you again."

He turned to Mike.

"Mike..."

"Uh, yes, boss?" He tilted his cowboy hat.

"Which of my workers do you trust most?"

"Uhh, the green Pippins. Battat, sir," Mike answered earnestly.

"Then fetch me the green Pippins."

Mike paused, wobbling his large head as if he realized what he'd just done. "Are youse sure- is he in trouble too-"

"Mike. I'm sure." The firmness in his voice was back. "He will be this one's parole officer."

Your stomach sank, followed by your own sharp inhale.

This couldn't be happening.

The cowboy nervously swallowed, and hopped away, his mechanical body's sounds reminding you all too much of the pursuit from just barely over an hour prior. The door closed gently behind him.

You were still on your knees, gloved claws on the dark cherry hardwood of Tenna's desk, body still violently trembling, eyes blankly staring downwards.

You'd almost died. You'd almost died all because you didn't want to be heckled by a Zapper and you started running and you tripped and you fell and you tried to catch yourself but you didn't and you caused an entire wall of televisions to come crashing down and you almost were killed and and and and-

A finger gently caressed your shoulders as you spiralled.

"You're frightened." Tenna couldn't help himself, even when justifiably furious, he instantly softened if he saw whoever he was addressing trembling in fear. It didn't matter what they did.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he reiterated. "I'm... very angry. But I will not hurt you."

You couldn't respond - all you could do was continue to gasp for air. The room spun. His screen faded to it's normal light and a worried frown was visible.

He didn't understand mortality - darkners of flesh and bone could still die. Darkners of plastic and resin with blood weakly pulsing underneath their unnatural flesh were capable of dying. A robot can always be fixed. A mangled pippins crushed under dozens of televisions twice their size couldn't.

You didn't try to justify yourself when the Zapper brought you in. You didn't even know how. You watched as Mike left, and came back more... muscular. You didn't know why he shapeshifted, but you did know when he was nearly twice the size of a fridge, that it meant he was willing to dish out whatever punishment. Tenna had left the room, with Mike to loom over you - to prevent escape. You were lucky you weren't just put into a ball and left to rot somewhere, you'd reminded yourself. He'd come back to announce the mess was gone, only to sit down and begin interrogating you. On what you were doing, how it happened, why it happened, what compelled you to do something so destructive. The room spun and all you could do was pathetically stammer, "I'm sorry," over and over and over. Even Mike's stance had loosened, certain you were telling the truth of that much at least.

Your eyes were haunted by the visions of televisions tumbling towards you in a flashing avalanche of plastic and glass and wires and sparks and electricity. Your chest rapidly heaved, gasping for air as the visions came back. Tenna patiently continued to use a finger to rub your back - he understood you were in some form of panic, but he didn't understand the gravity of it. Of course he didn't. How could he? A small part of you still appreciated the gesture.

In the back of your mind, you made a mental note to not prank him any more. You were completely at his mercy and he still was showing kindness.

The trance of terror you were in was disrupted by incoherent shouting, but the shouting quickly quieted as it approached. Tenna's hand did not move as Mike opened the door, Battat in tow. Mike was mumbling something you couldn't hear.

You didn't look up - you knew without looking that a green eyed glare was fixed on the back of your head. If looks could kill, you didn't even need to see him to know you'd be a splash of red if he had his way. So, your gaze remained transfixed on your gloves. Did they always look this fuzzy and wobbly?

"Mr. Tenna," Battat's voice was already slipping into a sickeningly sweet, faux-professional tone. "I heard Mike here volunteered me, but I can't accept this request-"

"Why not?" Tenna interrupted.

"Well, you see- I am very busy," Battat's fake smile could be heard. "I work very hard for you every day, it would be a distraction for me-"

"They'll be just as busy as you, in the same room," Tenna pressed.
"But sir, how can I keep an eye-"

"They'll work with you. Easy."

"Yes, but-"

"I require them to be supervised, twenty four seven." Tenna hummed, and turned his chair to face the window as he spoke, lighting a cigarette. "You'll be living together. You'll get a pay raise, a generous one for the inconvenience. Is that fair?"

"Wh- sir, I need my privacy too-"

"And you can have that. But I need this one supervised at all times."

"How can you expect-"

"I'm sorry if this feels like a punishment," Tenna turned back around, and took a long drag from his cigarette as he calmly faced the two of you. "Mike here recommended you as my best worker, one he trusts the most. If Mike wasn't doing everything as my right hand, I'd have him babysit this... what's your name?"

You didn't register the question. You'd only been staring blankly forward.

"Red Pippins, what's your name?" Tenna waited, before he sighed. "They must be in a state of shock."

An elbow hit your shoulder firmly.

"Cardinal," you choked out.

"Cardinal... like the red songbird." Tenna hummed as he turned his chair to face off to the side - not quite having his back fully turned, just enough so he could easily switch between gazing out the window into the snowy darkness, and back at the three darkners on his desk. "But, I require someone to watch Cardinal, here. They're a liability if left alone. I think, as one of my prized workers, you'd be able to handle the task, Battat? You'd be making me very happy if you took this on for me. It's very important to me, you know."

The sweet talking worked.

You tried not to look at him directly. Two Tennas wavered unevenly in front of you.

".... Yes, Mr. Tenna. I understand. Thank you for trusting me." His voice was strained, the fake niceness stretched to its limits. "I will keep this one out of trouble." He refused to even say your name - merely referring to you came out as a hiss. You shrunk again.

"You'll be situated together for everything." Tenna pursed his lips and stared out the window. You could see Battat's fists held in a trembling clench beside you. You glanced at Mike, who seemed to be trying to convey his most apologetic looks at Battat. God. This was a shitshow.

"You will be moving into better accommodations to compensate for the inconvenience. But this is still punishment," the CRT wagged his finger at you. "You are not to even leave your living quarters without an escort. You will be constantly monitored until we can all trust you will not be causing large-scale destruction again." He turned around, and reached into his desk, pulling out a large folder. He flipped through it with a hum, his internal fans whirring

along. He studied the paper intently, before reaching for a smaller paper. He wrote something down, neatly folded it and handed it to Mike.

"Take this. It's the apartment they'll be staying. Please memorize it for random checkups. I'll also have the keys prepared tonight, and tomorrow they can move their belongings."

"Yessir." Was Mike's simple response.

"I'll have Mike escort you out, then. Thank you, green Pippins."

"It's... surely... some kind of honour."

As soon as the three of you were outside the office, Battat's walking sped up.

"Uh, b- Batts," Mike started. "Slow down, please."

He continued to storm down the hallway, and stood at the end.

"Is youse okay to walk...? You don't look so good..." Mike gingerly wrapped an arm around you, and spoke in a murmur only you two could hear. "Youse said it was an accident?"

You nodded weakly.

He tried to hop in a way that didn't jostle you too much - before trying to awkwardly shuffle. It was clear he noticed you were still borderline catatonic.

"Don't mind the b- Batts," he said gently. "He's a a little scary, but means well. I'm more worried about yous. Yous is... lookin real bad..." he trailed off.

"What's your goddamn problem?" Battat snapped from down the hall. "What's taking so long? Let's get this over with already. Just carry them if they won't walk."

"Uh... that okay with you?" Mike seemed incredibly uncomfortable, maybe even a bit embarrassed.

You couldn't respond. Your body had only finally given up the shakes just to be replaced by a hollow feeling that sort of resembled dread. Unthinkingly, you leaned into him.

He picked you up in his arms, almost cradling you. Battat's expression was twisted in something unreadable. He gently maneuvered to press your face into his shoulder, and tried to move your arm to wrap it around his neck. One arm supported your lower body while the other hugged your shoulders against him. You closed your eyes.

"Batts," Mike spoke cautiously. "I think theys gonna be sick..."

Battat ignored him, and continued to lead the way.

Fortunately, you didn't get... any sicker. But you were certainly unwell. Still in a state of shock, the blood long drained from your face, your heart thundering for so long left you feeling weak, lethargic, like you were going to faint. You were a petty criminal, sure. No more than any other Pippins. But now your life was ruined over an earnest mistake, one you didn't know how to rectify.

Being babysat 24/7 really would've been a slap on the wrist if your parole officer was anyone but Battat. The coworker who, even with zero prior conflicts with you, only usually liked you for five minutes a week total.

In the elevator, Battat opened his mouth once, just to be instantly silenced by Mike.

"I'm Mike," the introduction sounded strange to you, but you didn't really care as you clung to him pathetically. "Yous can be mad about it later. It's my fault for sayin youse trustworthy, but..." he held you tighter. "It's true. I didn't think when I'd answered, Batts. But this one's in shock. Whatever happened, theys been rattled enough."

"... Whatever," Battat muttered. "I still have questions."

"Ask them after they rest." Mike's tone was firm. "Something's wrong."

"Why do you keep saying that?"

"Well, they aren't speaking, and they're barely moving..." the hand on your back squeezed you a bit. You were too wiped out to react. "They shook the whole time boss was interrogatin', and they were breathin all funny like."

"How do you not know they're faking?"

"The look in their eyes." You were sure if Mike could frown, he would. But you could hear it in his voice.

Battat only responded with a grunt. "Well, this ruins basically everything," his voice was still dripping in anger. "I don't know why they had to go destroy an entire wall, but now it's my problem, isn't it?"

Mike didn't react, only followed Battat out as he carried you down the hallway.

The door was unlocked, opening easily. Your eyes were sealed closed, not bothering to take in the room. You felt yourself gently being lowered onto a bed.

"... I won't be able to.... duties... as much...."

"S'fine... me and Plues..."

"... ruining my fucking day..."

".... get over it... stay here... get the keys..."

Your vision faded to black. You did not rest well.

Chapter 4: Adjustments

Chapter Summary

> I think this might actually be the longest chapter I've written for anything. Damn! I hope you enjoy the big read!

Mornings in the Dark Worlds were not determined by gentle sunlight, by birds chirping, by gentle waves of fog lapping the horizon or by anything visually meaningful.

TV world was an abyss forever entrenched in snowfall, an isolated but massive building with its own ecosystem, an hour and a half's drive away from Cyber City. The main way to indicate morning was by alarms, and a darkner's inner clock. Some were nocturnal, some were diurnal. You, personally, were of the crepuscular variety - if you had a midday nap, you were contentedly active in the mornings and evenings. But that was before being forced to adhere to TV world schedules.

Your eyes slowly opened, weak and tired.

Pitch darkness, aside from a sliver of flickering light at the bottom of a nearby door. You sat up, a bit more alert at the unfamiliar setting. You usually slept with your window open and a dim nightlight on your wall, to better appreciate the snowfall. This wasn't your room.

The events of yesterday hadn't fully returned to you as you blindly felt your way around. This was a surprisingly large bed - much bigger than the twin size you usually slept on. It had to be a double sized mattress or something, you noted passively. You'd been rolled up against the wall, you supposed.

As you finally found your footing, and with claws outstretched, you felt your way forward. No furniture stood between you and the door, to your relief. Gently, you ran your gloved claws around the door to find the handle, feeling its shape and which way it turned. Cautiously, you opened the door, careful to not make a sound. You peeked your head out and frowned.

It was a nice room - already furnished, and larger than your own room. A television playing some old movie was the only thing illuminating the room. An L-shaped couch seperated the "living" room from the small kitchen, complete with it's own tiny kitchen island with stools. Directly across from your room, was another door. Presumably another bedroom? Maybe?

Past the kitchen was a small doorway, with 2 sets of shoes neatly lined by the door. The silhouette made it clear one pair was actually boots. You suddenly looked down to realize your own boots had been removed - did someone carry you in and put you to bed?

You stepped into the room. On the right wall, where you'd emerged from your door, was a slightly smaller door left ajar. Stealthily, you padded your way to the door - just to see.

You felt around for the lights, and flicked them on.

It was a small restroom - complete with a tub and shower curtains, a vanity-lit mirror and a large vent on the ceiling. Green towels hung above the toilet. You nodded to no one in particular, satisfied that at least you knew where that was. Flicking the lights back off, you turned back to the main room, and treaded to the kitchen.

5:36 AM, the little oven clock read.

Okay. So, at least, you weren't late for work.

You turned to the television, weakness still weighing your limbs. You wandered to the couch to see...

Nobody. You seemed to be alone.

You went back to investigate the shoes by the door - the boots were definitely yours. The shoes weren't, though. Even in only the flickering light of the television, you could tell your boots were a bit smaller.

Memories began to flood you. The normal but kinda shitty workday, lunch with Rye, the editing room... getting a drink, wandering...

Your heart began to race again.

The loud, mechanical noises of the Zapper chasing you over a barrage of sounds, the crashing the crashing the crashing the crashing the crashing the crashing the crashing

You slid to the floor, hands over your mouth and chest. Why why why was this having such a horrifying affect on you?! Why was this haunting you?! You survived, right? This couldn't be eating you the way it did, and yet, visions of televisions cascading down, unseeing and unfeeling, ready to execute you whirled wildly in your mind.

The television in this place was a flatscreen. Just different enough your brain didn't try to connect it with the large, heavy CRTs that only were moments away from killing you, or your boss, whos kindness felt jarring after almost being killed by a wave of CRTs. You crawled towards the couch, and found yourself cuddling helplessly into a pillow. The decades-old romance movie continued to play, fake accents and technicolour distracted your senses from the onslaught of memories. Just keep your eyes on something else. Just keep your eyes on something else. It worked, fortunately. You found sleep gently tugging at you once more.

When you awoke, the television was off. The kitchen light was on behind you, and the screen reflected someone sitting at the kitchen island - his back to you. All that could be heard was the shuffling of paper and a mug being set down. For some reason, you felt like a child who knew they were in trouble. You tried to silently pull yourself up to see Battat, doing paperwork alone at the table. He took another sip from his mug and heavily exhaled.

"I know you're awake."

His voice jolted you. You tried to shrink.

"You were snoring, and then I heard you moving." He turned his head, not enough to face you, but enough to acknowledge your presence.

You said nothing.

"We aren't working today." His voice was cold. "Tenna gave us the day off. To help you move the rest of your things here. I already did mine last night."

You stared at your gloved claws, feeling like a shell of yourself.

"You've complicated things for me." His tone shifted to accusatory. "I don't know what compelled you to go screwing around and breaking everything, but now it's my problem," he hissed. "I'm your 'parole', your babysitter, and now my life is infinitely harder."

If he wasn't already made of milky white resin, he'd be white-knuckling the handle of his mug. "I don't even know how I'm supposed to keep up with my duties," he growled.

"I'm sorry," your voice barely carried over to him, but he heard it.

"Whatever," he released the mug. "We have errands to do today. We have to move your stuff in here, and I want to get groceries. I also want to lay down some rules."

You nodded, despite him not seeing you.

"Rule one, you are to never enter my room."

"Got it,"

"Rule two, I don't care about noise, just nothing ridiculous after midnight."

"Fair-"

"Rule three, we will never clean up after each other. You have to be tidy."

"Reasonable."

"Rule four, I don't care if you eat whatever's in the fridge, as long as it's not clearly leftovers." He turned to give you an undeserved stink eye. "I've had friends eat my sandwiches straight from my fridge. If you do it, I'll kill you. But I don't care if you snack on whatever. I'll deal with groceries, but you have to pitch in."

You nodded frantically. "I don't eat after others anyway, pitching in is only fair."

He seemed to loosen up at that, expression relaxing. Battat was very serious about food, you noticed. It'd be funny if you didn't feel like shit.

"We can divide chores evenly, or just go by a consideration basis."

"Consideration basis?"

"We clean up after ourselves, but if the floor needs to be cleaned, then whoever notices it will clean it. If the place needs dusting, then whoever's available will do it. Is that fair?"

He seemed satisfied by your nodding.

Battat, you found, was very flippant with emotions. He was easy to anger, easy to satisfy, easy to dismiss you, but if he felt he was being heard, he seemed to relax. At work, he often spoke no more than ten words and would live with a scowl. But here, under horrible circumstances, you'd never seen him sipping coffee and reviewing papers as casually as he did now.

"You said your name was Cardinal?" He suddenly asked.

"Yes." You tried to give him quick, to the point answers whenever you spoke to him.

"Like the bird?"

"Yes. Because of my red coat."

"I'll call you Card, then."

You pursed your lips and decided not to say anything.

"Anyways, when do you expect you'll be ready to get your stuff?"

"Whenever you are?" You dumbly responded.

"Once I'm done my coffee, then. I made a whole pot if you want some."

You decided not to take him up on his offer; but still you rose and ambled past him to the fridge and peeked inside.

He stocked it with presumably what he had from home. Not a whole lot, a few things here and there, but most importantly: there was water bottles. Which was all you really wanted right now. You took two, shoving one in your pocket and downing as much as you could of the other. Battat stared at you dumbly as you gulped it down.

"It's... not going anywhere, you know." He spoke slowly.

"Just dehydrated," you panted for air.

"You're allowed to take them whenever you want," he began, "so I'm just curious why you shoved one in your pocket...?"

"Ah... I have medicine I gotta take when we're at my place." Telling him this made you feel strangely naked - only Rye knew about your health issues.

"Oh... is it urgent?"

"Uh, not like... super urgent, it's just. Uh.." you stammered awkwardly. "I just need a lot of supplements. That's all." You frowned at nothing in particular.

He furrowed his brows.

"We'll get going soon, then."

Fortunately, he was quick on his feet.

Unfortunately, you weren't.

At least not today. Your heartbeat hammered irregularly - a small part of you knew you were in for a doctor's appointment, but travelling to and from Cyber City was always annoying. Rye would often simply drive you, but that was when you were living alone. And not needing a babysitter. Did Battat also need to go with you outside of TV world? You should've asked, but it completely slipped your mind. Maybe he knew.

"Do you... have to accompany me everywhere?"

"We've been through this," his irate tone was back. "Yes."

"Even outside TV world?"

He paused. "Well... I assume so?"

You hummed in concern.

"Why?"

"I, uh..." you anxiously fidgeted as you both resumed, making your way into the elevator with him. "I have to see a doctor. Kinda regularly."

He seemed like he was going to drill you with questions before he nodded, and sighed begrudgingly. "Just tell me when, I guess."

You nodded awkwardly as thanks.

You both made it to your place quickly. He watched as you beelined for your cupboard, popping open three bottles and taking a vitamin from each one. You held your counter for a moment like it was the only thing keeping you standing, before steadying yourself. "Okay. I'll be fine."

"Let's get this over with, then."

Thankfully, you didn't have too many worldly possessions. More clothing than anything. You had a few trinkets, plushes, books, nothing the two of you would struggle to carry. All the rooms in TV world always came pre-furbished, so the prospect of carrying couches up stairs was fortunately not on the table. Your home was small, a typical single Pippins residency. A couple quilts and blankets, some unique dishes you had for yourself, and your cupboards

didn't have much in them. Two gaming consoles - a handheld, and a plug in. Your PC would be the hardest to move, but it's doable.

"Easier to pack than my place, at least," Battat grumbled as he shoved your clothes into bags. "Mine was four trips."

What the hell did he have that would require four trips? What? Your new shared residency seemed pretty sterile - the basic furniture already there. Maybe a potted plant could've been his. He didn't run around in new outfits every day or anything. Most of the employees here didn't actually have much going on, except maybe the penthouses upstairs, like the Weather Duo. Lower ranked employees like Pippinses and Shadowguys usually had only an armful or two of belongings that weren't their uniforms.

Battat caught your expression, before he fixed you a glare. "Don't look like that - I just keep a lot of papers. A lot."

You nodded slowly, and continued packing.

He was right, though, it was an easy two trips. You carried your blankets on your shoulders, and the few contents of your cupboards and fridge all carefully packed in a bag. He carried your clothes in two large bags, and consoles in his free arm.

The second trip was basically just the PC - you carried the monitor, keyboard, mouse, and he carried the tower and all the accompanying wires. Your chest hurt, but you ignored the physical aching. The supplements kept some energy in your stride otherwise.

He helped with the unpacking, to your relief.

He set to work on your PC in your bedroom, while you refolded your clothes to put into drawers. You worked together in a steady silence, grateful he wasn't forcing small talk. You'd already unpacked the food contents and put them in their respective places - milk, dairy in the fridge. Ice cream and a few frozen TV dinners in the freezer (alongside his. You'd have to ask later if it mattered whose was whose when your tastes apparently overlapped). Your dried pastas and ramen in one cupboard, spices and seasonings in the other.

Now, as you put away the last of your clothes, you heard your PC whirring to life. He hummed in satisfaction, dusting himself off. He stood, hunched over the desktop.

He stood back, satisfied - he'd adjusted the positions of your keyboard and mouse to be more comfortable.

He straightened, adjusting his tie as he looked over at you. "You ready to get groceries?" He asked.

"Sure, uh... like, now?"

"What did you think I meant?" The green Pippins' tone was sharp.

You shot him a glare through narrowed eyes before you sighed and nodded.

You still didn't like each other, but you were trying to work with what you were given. You were grateful he was just pissy and not at your throat about it, but you knew deep down, he was probably still deeply resentful. He was being cordial. It was clear from his tired eyes, his dragged out exhales and impatient claw tapping that he was deeply displeased, but keeping it together, maybe if only because he recognized you weren't doing well, either.

You wondered if he'd be more openly hostile if you weren't clearly some form of fragile.

A knock on the door startled you, while he sighed. He stalked to your doorway and called out for the knocker to identify themself.

"Uh, it's us, boss. Plues 'n' I."

"Come in, then." Battat didn't move from your doorway - he just leaned out, holding onto the frame for support, one leg awkwardly in the air for balance.

You stayed frozen in place as you saw a Zapper hop their way into the apartment.

Battat looked over his shoulder suddenly, eyebrows furrowing. "What's your problem?"

"Wh- huh?"

"Breathing loudly-"

"Oh, right, boss-"

"Don't call me that in front of this one," Battat ordered, snapping to look back at the Zapper, and used his thumb to indicate to them that you were the mentioned 'this one'.

"Uh, anyways," the Zapper continued. "Plues 'n' I wanted to check in..."

"Who is- well," Battat awkwardly prompted.

"Called off," the Zapper responded cheerfully.

He ran green claws down his face before nodding. "Right. Right. Okay. So you guys wanna get groceries with us, then?"

An excited trill and a mhmm from the Zapper and the Shadowguy you only finally saw. The Shadowguy, much to Battat's ire, poked his head through the doorway to very obviously check you out. You felt like all you'd been doing in the last twenty hours was trying to make yourself small.

"It'll be less miserable for me with you guys around, anyhow." His words were quiet, not meant for you, but you heard anyway. You frowned and glared at the floor.

This was miserable for you, too.

"Come on, then," Battat turned to address you. "Guys, this is Cardinal. Cardinal, this is Jongler," he motioned at the Zapper, "and this is Pluey." He motioned to the Shadowguy, who

blew you a kiss.

"Stop harassing my probationer," Battat sighed.

Pluey trilled a noise of laughter. Jongler looked at you with what you could only discern as concern - why? Did the Zapper pity you?

You got up and followed them out.

Grocery shopping with three darkners you barely knew was... interesting.

This was the most you'd ever seen Battat getting along with anyone - reacting to jokes, barking orders but not seeming serious with whatever irritation would spring up. He was content pushing the cart size adjusted for Pippinses, and asking the other two to grab things you Pippins couldn't reach. He made sure to order you to pick out whatever you wanted.

"I plan to have our groceries last at least two weeks," he puffed. "So just grab whatever. I don't care. Just pitch in."

Fair enough.

Pluey was the funniest, you found. You were admittedly a little charmed. As a Shadowguy, he moved with uncanny speed - the faster he moved, the more shadows would trail behind him. He'd pick up tons of snacks just for Battat to groan and quickly go, "this is for MY place, not yours- okay fine just throw it in I don't care just stop making that face you idiot!" And he'd look at you and wiggle excitedly whenever he got Battat to agree to whatever he contributed. If you began trailing too far behind, the taller two darkners would slow down. Jongler would patiently wait for you, head wobbling side to side, and Pluey would stop, look over, run over and make grand gestures to encourage you to move along with him.

A small part of you was still a little afraid of Jongler, but their gentle demeanour made you try to remind yourself they likely weren't the Zapper who'd chased you.

Pluey kept making saxophnonic trills imitating meows. He was thrilled anytime you'd meow back.

Battat's expression deepened into frowns whenever he had to look at you for too long. But the other two seemed to keep him at least in a state of content, reducing him to just banter, eye rolls, and carefully checking off everything on his list. You didn't even know he'd made a list, but it seemed exactly like something he'd do.

As you agreed, you pitched in - in fact, you surprised Battat by paying for over half.

"H-hey, this isn't a charity," he stammered defensively. "I just-"

"I know," you cut in, and swallowed hard. "It's just... just don't think about it." It's just your fault and you felt bad he too was displeased by this situation. And he was bad at hiding his emotions, it was clear he resented you. You just wanted this to be as easy as possible.

Pluey and Jongler were excellent company, at least. They helped carry everything to your new place and put everything away. Battat barked at Pluey for help with dinner - the latter shooting you another blown kiss when he was certain his green companion wasn't looking.

Battat ordered you to just "stay out of the way". Like a scolded child, you sat on the couch by yourself and listened to Pluey get on Battat's nerves.

"Is it okay if I sit here with yous?"

Jongler's voice caught you off guard.

You quickly nodded and scooted over, giving them more than enough room.

They sat beside you, and you uncomfortably made a small amount of distance.

They toyed with their thumbs anxiously. "I heard about yesterday,"

Your claws sank into your legs, threatening to breach your gloves.

"I'm sure everyone did." You croaked quietly.

They laid a reassuring red hand on you.

"I think yous was innocent," they hummed. "I saw... Mike carryin yous. That's not the face of a bad fella."

You said nothing, not realizing you were shaking until their hand gently rubbed your shoulder.

"Sorry for assumin' if you're a fella..." they began. "I call everyone dat."

This was so awkward. You wanted to evaporate. But you appreciated the kindness.

They shifted uncomfortably before speaking quietly again, keeping their volume at a low hum - only for your ears. "Batt's not bein' real bad, is he? He's kind of a jerk, but... he's a softie deep down."

"I think he's pissed at me," you confessed. "But it's fair. It's my fault."

"Maybe," Jongler whirred. "I knew youse was a bit of a troublemaker, but who isn't here?"

You turned to look at the sympathetic Zapper, and they nervously fidgeted at their bandana. "Plues 'n' I know he can be real... abrasive. Just had to check in."

"Thank you," you whispered back. "I don't... think he's gonna kill me in my sleep at least." You gave Jongler a weak smile. They leaned back and gave what only could be understood as a smile back, wobbling their head lightheartedly.

"Das good. We'll check in often. Or just me or just Plues," they whirred again. Their mechanical noises were becoming less fearsome to you, which reminded you-

"Sorry if I'm skittish around you, it's... not you," you blurted. "I got chased when everything happened," you confessed.

Jongler froze, and looked at you in concern.

"Chased?"

"Yeah, by a Zapper," your black gloved arms wrapped around yourself tightly. "I got real frantic and crashed... and-"

Their arm wrapped around you, tightly but not enough to hurt you. It was clear they had experience gently handling Pippinses.

"I assumed so." Jongler's voice was soft. "Pippinses don't look that afraid for nothin'," they gave a small, reassuring squeeze. "You're safe now. None of us, Batts included, will let anything-"

"Dinner's almost done- what are you guys doing over there?!" Battat's voice made you leap out of your skin.

Dinner was delicious - Battat and Pluey made a simple pasta with mushrooms, diced tomatoes, onions, garlic, zucchini, a creamy tomato sauce, and some chili flakes. You were shocked the two boys made such a heavenly meal, but it was quick and savoury. You snuck in seconds, not catching both chefs looking proud of themselves and exchanging pleased glances when they saw you going for more.

You felt sad when Jongler and Pluey were leaving for the night.

"Was a pleasure meetin' yous," Jongler had leaned down to give an awkward but gentle embrace.

Pluey trilled something you were too scared to translate - lest your cheeks light up. Battat's face already conveyed he immediately knew - cheeks flushed and looking affronted, yet he stayed quiet. Pluey planted soft, shadowy kisses on both cheeks and tipped his hat. Battat shooed the two out.

He locked the door behind them, before turning to you, adjusting his tie.

"Hope you didn't mind them." Was all he said before he awkwardly walked away.

You stared after him, before calling out, "uh... I'm gonna shower and hit the hay."

"You can use the towels, just hang them back up again." Battat said, before he locked himself in his room.

You nodded to nobody in particular, and made your way to your room. Clawing through your belongings, you finally found your pajamas. You took off the poncho, carefully folded it, and made your way to the washroom.

You flicked on the light, and the fan. Humidity wasn't really your friend. You closed the door behind you. You doubted it'd need to be locked - you didn't like the idea of living with a guy. But you weren't really concerned he was going to come barging in.

The warm water was soothing. You lost yourself for a moment, before setting to work on scrubbing yourself clean. You winced when you brushed your hip and elbow - you didn't notice you were bruised from your fall. You whimpered at the sensation, before trying to self soothe in the only way you could: singing to yourself. You timed your showers that way, anyway, the amount of songs you lazily sang and often forgot lyrics to were usually the measure of how much time you spent scrubbing yourself and letting water soak over you before switching to cold water. Healthier for your skin, anyway.

When you were done, you shook yourself off, stepping over the edge of the tub - while holding it and praying you weren't about to have another spill and fall. You still quietly sang to yourself as you dried off, wrestled with the devil to put on socks and protective gloves while still damp, and shuffled into comfortable nightwear. You neatly re-folded and hung the towels, brushed your teeth, and finally left the bathroom, carrying your clothes.

Battat was sitting at the table, tapping away at his laptop while some video played in the background.

"Goodnight," you hesitantly offered.

He only barely glanced at you.

"Goodnight."

And so, you went to bed. You tossed and turned as you dreamt of wandering abandoned corridors.

Chapter 5: Closets and nightmares

Chapter Summary

> FINALLY we are seeing more of Battat's softer side! This is for everyone who was worried he was gonna be a jerk forever 🙏💚

You had to admit: the larger bed was nice.

Even if nightmares haunted you. The big bed was comfortable.

You rolled out bed, and wandered out into the main room, still in your pajamas.

Battat was still at the table, arms folded and his resin head resting on his arms. He'd long taken off his poncho - he was still in his work clothes otherwise. Green vest undone, white shirt rolled up to his elbows and his long, sleek green gloves still on snugly. Looking down his form, even his ankles were neatly crossed, black socks blending in with his pants. His laptop screen was black, as if it fell asleep with him. Something about seeing him hunched over the marble island made you wonder if he was cold. You quietly went back into your room and dug around. After grabbing a small but warm blanket, you carefully made your way toward him. Ever so gently, you draped the purple fabric over his shoulders. He let out a small noise akin to a whine, only to bury his face more.

It was... cute.

You didn't know what to do with that realization.

Living together, you wondered if there'd be more moments like this. But you decided you didn't want to be out here much longer, knowing when he would eventually awaken, his iron walls would be right back up. So you decided to quickly go through with your quest. The real reason you came out here:

A snack.

You pried open the fridge as close to silently as possible and assessed your options. You had to be quick. You took a chocolate pudding cup - the kind that came with an itty bitty plastic spoon, much to your delight. You looked over your shoulder at Battat. He was still sound as asleep, but a small part of you was a little paranoid. You closed the fridge as quietly as you could.

Then you made your way back to your room to eat in mostly darkness.

Then you snuck back out to throw the empty pudding cup in the garbage.

Then you went back to bed, satisfied.

Two hours later, and you were finally meant to be awake. Your alarm buzzed by your head. With a loud groan and stretch, you got up with the intent to stay up this time.

You got dressed - black pants, white dress shirt, red vest, black and red poncho with a black hood, long black gloves. Some Pippinses rolled up their sleeves and tucked the gloves underneath their dress shirt's sleeves, some wore their gloves over their sleeves, and others just wore them underneath. You opted for sleeves rolled up just below the elbow. You felt a little daring today - and wore grey striped socks with a little paw pattern by the toes. Not that anyone but you would know.

You stepped outside your room, feeling a little bit brighter. The chocolate pudding snack definitely helped. Now you had to take your vitamins.

The first thing you noticed, was Battat was gone. His room door was closed, but the light was on underneath, so maybe he was getting dressed. His laptop and papers were gone, too. The second thing you noticed: your blanket was gone!!! The purple one!!! The one you laid on him!!! You tiptoed to the couch, to see if maybe he left it there, but there was not a thread of purple. He didn't leave it on the table, or counter - you even turned to see that he didn't even leave it outside your door.

Did he take it?

No matter.

It kept him warm. Maybe he'll be nicer to you because of the gesture. Maybe.

You did, secretly, hope he'd have left it out for you to recollect - it was cute with pastel patterns, and a cartoon character you found cute. You reminded yourself that you live together now - whether you liked it or not. It'll show up again. You just didn't want to deal with asking him about it. It would probably be just as, if not more, embarassing for him than it was for you. And you'd rather not do that to him, even if he was a jerk.

You made your way to the kitchen and took a water bottle again, and tried to remember which cupboard you'd unofficially made the medicine cabinet. Right. The furthest one, closer to Battat's room, but it was more isolated - meaning your medicine was generally left alone. A small part of you hoped he didn't ever look past the painkillers you put at the front, lest he see all the deficiencies you suffered in the form of massive vitamins. You hand trembled as you reached for the three bottles you'd come so intimately familiar with. One, two, and three. All went down smoothly. You carefully rearranged them again, tucking them in the back with your other medicines.

You grabbed generic vitamin gummies when he walked out - his sudden emergence startled you enough to nearly drop them.

"Uh... good morning?" He offered, clearly not sure what to do about startling you.

"Want a vitamin? They're raspberry?" You kicked yourself internally for not just saying good morning back.

"Wh... what for?" He extended a hand anyway.

You looked down at the bottle. "Immune and bone health?"

He struggled to stifle a laugh. "Okay. Sure. Thanks."

You carefully gave him one. Fortunately, he didn't ask about it. He popped it like it was candy, with a satisfied little hum. At least he liked the flavour.

"I'm making eggs," he stated.

"Oh, okay," you didn't know what reaction he wanted.

He looked over his shoulder at you. "So, do you want any...? How do you like them?"

"Yes, please, I'd like that,"

"Well how you like them, then?" He reiterated curiously.

"Scrambled."

He smirked. "Same."

You scurried away to brush your teeth - anything to escape the interaction. Not that he did anything wrong - you were just a bundle of nerves, and him suddenly being nice was still new to you. The coworker who hissed at you yesterday was offering to make you breakfast today. Even with a whole day of "bonding" (speaking loosely), you didn't know what to do with yourself now that he was less hostile.

But in any case, you still tried to stay out of his way until he called you over.

He left a plate out for you, with just eggs and toast (and a small jar of jam, just in case, you guessed). He was already set on making his own food.

"We'll be in editing all day today," he hummed. "Sound good?"

You nodded, before remembering his back was turned to you. "Yeah. Sounds good."

"Great. I wanted to be at the computers anyway, personally."

"Oh, uh, Battat," you started nervously, your words stumbling out.

He was plating his food as you spoke, and stopped for a moment to look at you. "Hm?"

"Th... thanks for the breakfast. It's really good," you hoped your compliment would help soften him up a bit.

It worked. He turned away, one hand on his hip, and the other bashfully scritched at the back of his neck. "If I'm gonna make food, I don't mind... making extra." He turned around, his expression failing to hide his pleasure at being complimented, before a dilemma crossed him. One so obvious even you could practically read his mind. There were 3 little stools at the small kitchen island. Two across the longer section, and one at the end. You unthinkingly sat yourself in the middle - which was still a "corner" seat (they all were, technically).

He awkwardly stood and picked at his plate before deciding he didn't care - he came and sat himself beside you to scarf down his breakfast.

You ate more leisurely, browsing your phone and giggling at funny posts on the internet. He did the same, except with videos. You could hear the alien conspiracies as he boredly flipped through.

"Thanks again," you chirped as you finished up. "I'll, uh, handle the dishes when we're back...?"

"Thanks," was his simple response.

Things were incredibly awkward. Though, a larger part of you was relieved. It'd take time to get used to him being less mean. You wondered if, when he woke up with your blanket around him, he decided to be nicer...? It felt foolish to wonder, but it wasn't a terrible theory. You didn't want to be enemies forever. Guilt constantly gnawed at you for putting him in this situation, and while he could be a hostile jerk, you imagined you'd also be pissy if you had to uproot your life to babysit another grown adult just because you were a reliable worker. It all felt ridiculous and unfair - and not just to you.

You both were out the door quickly, having rinsed the pan and plates. You brought a tiny carton of chocolate milk with you, while he had his coffee in a thermos. You really were opposites.

"Your coat..." he hummed, eyeing it. "Is it always that... abused?"

You scoffed quietly. "It's beloved, actually. And looks tough."

He exhaled through his nostrils. "Suit yourself."

The green Pippins was in a good mood - even with his tired, baggy eyes, he moved a bit more energetically. He had one hand in his pocket, the other comfortably holding his thermos. He released one final yawn. A sound you reluctantly liked. You kept up with him, not sure if you were supposed to stay in his line of sight or behind him. So, you tried to stay beside him unless you were passing others in the hallway, and then you'd slink behind him.

The Pippins at the head of editing, looking lazy as ever, didn't acknowledge the two of you as you walked in. Battat looked for the most isolated seats and sat himself down in the corner before firing up the computer and the one next to him.

"Alright, everyone... log into your respective work emails and the files you'll be working on will be there in a couple minutes..." he spoke tiredly.

You wondered if he ever said anything else.

Editing was, as usual, a breeze for you. You were done in a couple hours, boredly rewatching the footage before submitting it. Battat leaned over, brows furrowed. You took off your headseat. He noticed and lowered his.

"You're already done?" He whispered in disbelief.

"It's easy."

"Damn... maybe I should get Mike to promote you or something," he muttered. "Good job."

You nodded in thanks, and you both put your headsets back on. You submitted your work and flipped open a documentary to watch.

That was something you were grateful for with the editing room. As long as you did your work, they let you just do whatever. If you wanted to watch music videos, sure. Documentaties, sure. Movies, why not. As long as your work was done. This was the only room where they didn't make you waste your time looking busy - the work was always split up between a small handful of employees, all efficient at what they do. An entire day's worth of footage could be easily wrapped up in a nice bow in half a day if they were fast enough, so usually you were only there for either the morning or afternoon. But Battat wanted to be at the computers today - so it didn't really matter. You'd be here all day, too.

Battat tapped your shoulder when it was lunchtime.

You mindlessly followed him to the cafeteria - the place was bustling with activity as usual. You instinctively scanned for Rye, spotting him. Standing in line and waiting to order lunch felt egregiously long - you wanted to be with your friend, to sit next to him, and feel normal for the first time in days. You were glad that, despite the big event, you were still a typical red Pippins who blended in with the crowd. Stares evaded landing on you for long and your senses were filled with the usual lunchroom gossip around you. You only snapped back to reality when Battat nudged you to order for yourself. He waited patiently as you paid for yourself, then gently tugged you with him to wait for your food.

"You've been acting funny," he observed.

"Huh?"

"You're more... airheaded, weird," he rolled his hand at you expressively. "Aren't you like, a tough little delinquent?"

"I'm not-"

"No, you are," he interrupted quietly, his usual biting tone gone. "It's like... you're lost in your head more."

You didn't respond.

"Whatever! Fine! I could be wrong," he grouched. "I just see you a lot and you usually don't need me tapping you to focus on things. I'll drop it, jeez."

You nodded absently. He was right, though - it just wasn't something you understood how to address. You felt like you were in a fog, trying to feel your way out. You had a few moments of normalcy - working in editing helped. Hanging out with Pluey, Jongler, and even Battat gave you an odd sense of normalcy you felt you were lacking so suddenly. Otherwise, you felt like you'd been sleepwalking through time. It didn't feel right - everything was uprooted, and so suddenly, now you were having nightmares and heart palpitations worse than ever. You felt sicker and weaker, your condition likely worsened by the sudden trauma. You suddenly lived somewhere new, you suddenly had a paralyzing fear when you heard the mechanical sounds of Zappers. You suddenly developed the habit of staring into space and not speaking much - all things Battat couldn't fully understand without being explicitly told, but all still things he could see traces of and not know what to do with. You became a different person overnight.

Your prickliest coworker, with a weird complex about Pippinses - probably as a result of him always trying to be up Tenna's sleeve - now prodding you in the cafeteria in concern because even he noticed you'd not been acting right. You didn't even get a chance to tell Rye everything - he probably only vaguely knew you were involved in the crash, but not anything beyond.

"You're doing it again!" Battat's voice snapped you back. "I TOLD you," he huffed in frustration.

"Sorry," you murmured, grabbing your tray.

"Don't apologize?" He sounded baffled. "I was just observing- anyway, where do you wanna sit?" He tilted his head.

Your eyes wandered over to Rye, and noticed two empty seats beside him. You indicated with your head in his direction. Battat followed your gaze and nodded. "Sure."

You lead the way this time, carefully weaving around Shadowguys and Pippinses, eyes on your best friend. Battat stayed on your heels, committed to not losing you among the dozens of other red Pippinses. You pulled up beside Rye, whose eyes widened in relief before relaxing again. Then his gaze travelled up to Battat, before giving an awkward nod and smile.

"Hey buddy," Rye smiled gently at you.

"Hi," you breathed. "Sorry I was gone yesterday..."

He patted your shoulder as you adjusted in your seat. "S'all good, buddy. What's up?"

You frowned. "I have a parole officer."

"Hey!" Battat looked up from his food. "Don't bring me into this?!"

You exhaled a little laugh, and his green posture relaxed a little as he shook his head and resumed his lunch.

You looked back at Rye.

"At least he's responsible," he laughed gently.

"A man after my heart," Battat muttered between bites.

"So what happened?" Rye asked quietly.

You leaned in to quietly mumble, only for Rye to hear. "I got chased... I had a fall again, and I- well, yeah. I'm sure you know the rest. I have to be babysat twenty four seven now."

He frowned as he listened. "Rumour's been floatin' round, but... You had another fall?"

"The most destructive yet." You leaned your head on his shoulder, and sighed.

Rye pulled back so he could wrap an arm around you. "That's rough, buddy. See the doctor yet?"

"No... I haven't had the chance." You picked at your fries. "I will, soon."

"You've got me worried." He frowned, his gentle eyes creased with concern.

You pulled out from Rye's half hug when you caught Battat looking. You weren't sure why it made you self conscious. He averted his gaze. You continued to eat, eavesdropping on the Pippinses at the table - nothing particularly enthralling today, but they were invested in on some horse race betting. That didn't particularly interest you. Lunch droned on for what felt like longer than usual.

You said goodbye to Rye, and promised to catch up with him at a better time. So desperately you wanted to spill everything to him, but you couldn't. Not here, not with Battat and god knows how many others here to hear your vulnerabilities. In a sense, it only made you feel more isolated. Suddenly you were more grateful Battat had noticed and was trying to be nicer today. He lead you out of the cafeteria, awkwardly side-stepping other Pippinses and Shadowguys. You let him guide you halfway through TV world when his phone suddenly began blowing up. You were in an isolated hallway together.

"Hey, what's-"

"S'an emergency, boss-" Jongler sounded frazzled. "We need yous immediately."

Battat froze, then looked at you, before his eyes darted away. "But I'm heading back to editing with-"

"I know, I knows," Jongler sounded distressed over the line. "Big boss is malfunctioning, and we don't know what to do, this is where you're usually... he's-" an indistinct electronic screech could be heard, interrupting Jongler.

"Fuck," Battat whispered. "What do I do? I can't leave Card alone-"

"Me or Plues can take over watching...?"

"Yeah, actually, not terrible," Battat glanced at you. "Are you fine with Pluey or Jongler coming to watch you-"

"I'm an adult-" you started.

"Okay either one of you," Battat turned away. "I'll get them to hide for now, they're not supposed to be out alone," he grabbed you suddenly, dragging you down the hall.

Squawking protests didn't stop him, in fact, he only tuned you out, pulling you into a broom closet and still cryptically talking to Jongler. "They'll be in a closet in hallway 4B-"

"Do I look like a fucking toy to you-" you protested.

"It's just until one of them comes to get ya-" you kicked him as he shoved you down, trying to hide you.

You fought against him, and he planted a green gloved hand over your mouth. "Please," he begged. "They need me. It's something only I can do," he breathed.

The pleading in his voice halted you, but you still weren't sold on it. You squinted at him suspiciously.

"Just hide here," he hung up on Jongler. "Just hide here, Pluey or Jongler will come for you, take you home, I'll make sure this doesn't show up on your records, it's my fault anyway," he pleaded. "Just please. Trust me. I'm sorry. It's an emergency. I'll have Mike tell the superviser you threw up at lunch and was sent home, it won't be a problem- just please stay here, and don't make a sound."

You didn't have a choice, you realized, so you begrudgingly let him cover you, obscuring you from prying eyes. The sudden frantic behaviour in him freaked you out a little. He'd begun repeating himself in some kind of weird anxiety spell.

"Pluey or Jongler will come in with a knock, okay? I'm sorry, I'll be back. Do you trust me?"

Evergreen eyes met crimson. Finally, reluctantly, you nodded.

And like that, he was gone, his running footsteps fading from hearing range.

You were left alone in the darkness, hidden by boxes and musty old costumes and rags, the light under the door being the only indication of there being a world outside the darkness you were just plunged into. Nothing made sense, but you'd never seen Battat look that frantic, that fearful, his forest green eyes widened and looking uncertain. Something about it made you feel scared, too, but you weren't sure why. Why did Battat have to run off at Jongler reporting what must be Tenna malfunctioning? Was Battat a robot technician? He'd never shown any explicit interest in the mechanics, but you supposed you barely knew him still. There were

many things you'd yet to uncover about the green Pippins - the thought was strangely exciting to you.

You loyally didn't move a muscle, scared you'd blow your own cover. You weren't sure why he was so frantic to hide you instead of just escorting you back, if it was such a problem to let you go to editing or even home by yourself. Whatever, you decided to just listen and wait for Pluey or Jongler to come get you. In fact, you were letting yourself doze off, when something sent chills down your spine.

Loud, mechanical whirring, metallic and heavy thumping, the threatening beeps of a Zapper who'd detected something where it shouldn't be.

You stiffened. You knew you were hidden, but you felt like you were seen.

The heavy, approaching thuds were getting louder. The only sound between the floor-shaking footsteps were it's wild mechanical noises - you could hear its unpleasant static from your hiding spot, on the other side of the wall.

Your heartbeat was threatening to pound your eardrums, too.

Beep

Beep

Beep

Beep

Beep

The sound was threatening, like it was telling you it knew you were there. Was this some kind of sick joke?

Beep

Beep

Beep

Beep

Beep

Beep

Beep

The sound was louder, right outside the door.

You couldn't even shake. Tears rolled down your cheeks.

It knew you were here.

Tiny electronic sounds from its chest threateningly filled your ears.

Beep

Beep

Beep

Beep

Beep

Beep

Then something interrupted it.

A saxophnonic trill you couldn't quite understand, but it sounded like a cautious question.

The Zapper only rumbled wordlessly and the sounds faded, its heavy body thumping away. The noise was fully gone before a gentle knocking rapped on the door.

The door creaked open, and you could see a Shadowguy step in. He let out a low, gentle whistle, and tapped his leg - as if imitating asking for a cat to come out.

It couldn't be helped. You whimpered.

Pluey lit up, immediately set on digging you out. His wide grin fell into a sad frown when he saw your widened, fear stricken eyes, and tear stained cheeks. He looked over his shoulder,

then back at you. Pluey tilted his head and frantically whistled a tune - its translation roughly meant, "did something scare you?"

You nodded as you finally broke, chest heaving for air.

Pluey carried you home.

He sat with you on the couch, and refused to let you go until Battat came in. Your face was buried in Pluey's chest, still coming down from your panic, so you didn't see Battat - only heard him jogging to his room, huffing and puffing like he'd run a marathon.

"Don't look at me-" he strode in quickly. "Pluey, stop manhandling my probationer-" he ordered as he strode into his room.

Pluey whistled at Battat sharply. His door re-opened.

"What?" He sounded taken aback.

More quick tunes from Pluey.

"Wh- christ, that's- oh god. I'll be out in a second, then."

You clung tighter to Pluey. His shadowy form was tangible, only around the edges did it feel misty and... unreal. But he was warm, and his embrace kept you steady.

Battat was so quick to come back out, he was still sweating and huffing on an inhaler when he came into your field of vision. He crouched beside the couch, trying to get a good look at you.

"Good god," he muttered. "You look like you've seen a ghost," he stood up. Pluey gently moved you to be a bit more upright as well.

You couldn't speak.

Pluey tried his best to convey - it sounded like a dramatic orchestra with how his whistles, trills, toots and tunes tried to convey seeing the Zapper leaning against the door. Pluey insisted he didn't recognize who it was. You had a bit of delay in understanding shadow speak, but you were able to pick it apart, even if slower than Battat.

"God. I'm sorry," Battat bent over to your eye level. "I didn't even..." he trailed off. "I knew to hide you but I didn't... think someone has it out for you." He sounded disturbed, upset.

"Have you ever pissed off any of the Zappers? N-not to blame you or anything," he frantically added.

You shook your head, still feeling like you had to keep quiet. Paranoia crept up your skin as if it could still hear you.

Battat pulled another inhaler from his pocket and took two puffs before walking off - you could hear him fumbling about in the kitchen, muttering to himself. Pluey continued to protectively hold you in both shadowy arms, whistling something to Battat.

"No, I don't think we should invite Jongler tonight," Battat commented. "We should definitely tell them, though," he added.

"Cardinal," he addressed you. "Whenever you see a Zapper, remember Jongler always has a bandana. Always. And they speak more softly. I'm just reminding you so you know if you see one in a bandana, that's just Jongle." He hummed nervously. "What the fuck to do about the creepy one... Plues, you didn't recognize them?"

The Shadowguy let out two simple notes: nuh-uh.

Battat came back around, holding a bowl before handing it to you.

Ice cream. With raspberries and blueberries.

You looked up at him pathetically.

"Just take it," he looked away. "You need to eat and you need something comforting. You're safe now."

You tried not to cry again as you accepted the offering.

"Let's just... do something normal," he said, half to himself. He picked up the TV remote and flipped through channels. Battat's leg bounced rapidly, his jaw was tight - he was clearly running through a thousand thoughts. He looked unsettled by what Pluey described. "Oh, look, something normal."

A cartoon about a sponge and starfish.

Battat was clearly unsettled. He never fully relaxed. You finished your ice cream, and before you could get up to put it away, he snatched it from you.

"Don't worry about it. I'll also do the dishes. Are you still hungry?"

You didn't say anything, but sheepishly looked away.

"I'll make mac n cheese," he mused. "I feel better being busy, anyway."

He set to work in the kitchen. Pluey was extra clingy, even making musical meows at you occasionally to check if you were alright. He even checked your pulse at one point, before quietly singing that he was worried you were going to have a heart attack earlier.

You could hear a brief silence in the kitchen before rapid chopping of something.

You closed your eyes and leaned into Pluey.

You snapped back awake when Battat was crouched in front of you again, shaking you gingerly.

"Hey. Wake up. Food's done. You too, Plues. Dinnertime."

It was mac and cheese for sure, but it was extra delicious. Your eyes widened and you began to rapidly scoop more in your mouth, the first noise you'd made in hours just being a delighted whine.

You didn't catch his smile, but you saw him proudly adjust his tie. "I chopped pizza mozzarella in and added breadcrumbs, also a splash of hot sauce for added flavour... and lots of pepper." He puffed his chest with pride.

"It's wonderful, thank you," you said earnestly.

His cheeks flushed. "It's nothin'..."

Pluey hummed in agreement with you, before shooting Battat a look and laughing musically.

"You're lucky I can't kick you from here, asshole," Battat said through his teeth, pointing a finger at Pluey - but the corners of his mouth upturned in betrayal of his threat. "Anyways, uh. I made extra. In case you wanted seconds again..." he looked embarassed.

"I'd love that," you covered your mouth as you spoke. "Do you like cooking?"

"I'm no chef," he scritched his neck bashfully. "I just... uh. Let's not talk about this anymore," he laughed nervously.

Pluey only laughed louder.

"Shut UP, asshole!"

At the end of the night, Pluey left. He'd given both your cheeks a kiss, before Battat shooed him out the door again. "Okay okay okay that's ENOUGH," he'd stammered. Pluey made a dramatic affronted look, before more seriously taking one of your clawed hands in both of his, squeezing it gently, and he tipped his hat.

"He's saying he hopes you feel better," Battat translated. "He just isn't using music as usual to say it." He exhaled through his nose.

And then Pluey was gone.

Battat locked the door, then for the first time, you noticed he used the second lock, too.

Something about that you nervous. He looked at you in concern.

"Are you gonna shower and hit the hay, or just hit the hay?"

"Ahh... uh... I'll shower in the morning, I think, I feel like shit still."

He nodded, seemingly about to walk away, before you unthinkingly grabbed his arm.

"Thank you."

He looked surprised.

"Oh- ah- the dinner was really nothing, okay-"

"No, I just. Appreciate it. That and the ice cream. Thank you."

Silence hung between you two, gazes averted.

He finally inhaled, and slowly exhaled, a small tremor before he spoke caught your attention. Despite this, his voice remained steady as he spoke. "You don't have to go into details," he began quietly. "But..." he trailed off, seemingly debating on what he planned to say next. "You'll be safe. Yeah. You're safe. You Are Safe." He moved his free hand to rest over the hand of yours holding his arm.

He gave a small squeeze.

"You'll be alright. I- we'll look after you. Sorry for everything."

Sleep took you gently that night, reassured by his gentle words. But that didn't stop nightmares from digging their way back in - you woke up with a startled screech, panting alone in the darkness.

You opened your door, to see Battat sitting at the table, looking at your door in concern.

"You okay?"

"... just a bad dream," you responded quietly.

"Uh..." he looked around. "I'll be out here for a while, if it helps you feel better."

You nodded.

"You can just... sleep on the couch or something," he awkwardly offered.

That sounded like a plan.

You took a blanket, and pillow, and camped on the couch. He didn't have the TV on this time, but the kitchen lights were on, and the gentle tapping of him at his keyboard and the occasional shuffling of papers helped you sleep.

This time, nightmares left you alone.

Chapter 6: Soap and laundry

Chapter Summary

> Shorter chapter - but I wanted to let our two lovebirds actually bond a bit :) so I focused it almost explicitly on them beginning to awkwardly get along 😌

When you woke, your foot made contact with something unexpected - another foot.

Instinctively, you opened your eyes to see what it was. The television was still off, but the kitchen's under-cabinet lights behind you just gently illuminated Battat's sleeping figure, wrapped in a blanket of his own (your purple one still a no-show). He was snoring quietly, facing the room, so you could see his peaceful expression: mouth slightly open, fangs peeking out from behind his lips, facial muscles completely relaxed. An ungloved set of claws delicately cupped his own cheek. The rest of his body, aside from his exposed socks, was completely hidden in a dark green blanket. His head rested on a throw pillow.

You couldn't explain the feeling you felt looking at him.

The last few days had been a whirlwind of awful feelings, fear, anxiety, and trying to make yourself small. You'd begun really feeling like a shell of yourself. Normal Pippins mischief had been erased from your mind for days.

You'd left your phone on the coffee table in front of the couch. You reached for it to check the time.

You had three more hours before you had to be up. What a good feeling, you mused. Extra snoozing time.

But, you sought a thrill. Even if in the grand scheme of things, it was just a small thrill, it felt big and exciting to you. Delightfully devilish of you to even consider.

You sat up, and peered at Battat still, before taking the throw pillow on your own side and setting it up against his lower shins. Gauging his reaction, you watched him carefully. A small part of you felt strangely giddy.

His breath hitched and he shifted his weight. Still snoring, mouth still agape. Oh yeah. Out like a light.

You didn't even know why you were doing this.

A part of you earnestly reasoned the idea of contact was comforting. The other part of you just thought it'd be fun to see if he'd let you use him as a pillow, kinda. You shifted your weight and laid on your right side - so your head rested on the pillow against his legs.

He made another noise and you quickly closed your eyes, pretending to be asleep.

He mumbled incoherently.

Your heart thundered in your ears as he moved his legs, sat up, and you could hear his disoriented noises... before a pillow plopped down beside yours. And he shifted to lay with his head close to you. The green die shuffled around a bit before he went still, and his gentle snoring resumed.

Eyes opened, you finally peeked. He'd moved. He moved to be closer to you, too.

Jackpot.

This was unexpected, but the feeling was better than a thrill. You weren't really sure why. He completely moved just to have his head beside yours now. While you couldn't see his peaceful face anymore, it was a sacrifice you were willing to make if it meant being closer. One of his ungloved claws was close to your face now - you studied it with intrigue as you waited for your heartbeat to slow its pace.

In the soft lights, his upturned hand looked so... perfect. His claws were ivory, perfectly maintained, as if they were less of an inherited weapon and more of an art piece, sculpted meticulously for admiration. His skin looked smooth and soft. A very tiny part of you wondered what he looked like in better lighting, how it felt-

... You had to stop yourself from thinking about it any further. This wasn't helping your nervous heart. You looked away, eyes wide and cheeks hot. To see another Pippin's exposed claws was usually a sign of closeness or intimacy. It was just innocent awe - your own were smaller, more catlike: your pointed claws turned translucent towards the tips, while his remained ivory through and through. Maybe he was just overheated and took his gloves off, you reasoned. You closed your eyes and listened to his snoring as it gently shifted into deep, soft breaths. The sound was soothing to you. You realized being in close proxmity to someone was especially soothing to your nerves recently.

Sleep took you again.

When you woke up, he was still asleep. You checked the time only to see it wasn't a bad time to get up and squeeze in a shower.

You slowly and carefully got up, taking only your phone as you went back to your bedroom for a fresh change of clothes.

You flipped on the bathroom lights, closing the door gently behind you. You stripped down, attention on the songs you were queuing up to listen to on your phone. The shower wasn't terribly loud, it wouldn't wake him, but just enough so that whenever he woke up, he'd at least know to wait until you were out of there already.

The side of the tub against the wall was probably the funniest part of living with Battat. Neither of you seemed to care about organizing your bodywashes from each others. The one wall neither of you cared to keep organized - simply lined with pomegrante, vanilla, and

various strongly scented bodywashes and soaps. There was only two of you, so there really wasn't a need for a collection, and yet the two of you collectively had about eight. If you didn't remember the ones you'd personally bought, you wouldn't have been able to tell yours from his. The thought strangely amused you - your often mean coworker liked to smell like coconut cream some days, 'agave splash' on others. Whatever that meant. But it was endearing.

You turned on the shower and sang to yourself.

After you'd finished, you'd felt refreshed - still singing absentmindedly as you dried off and wrestled to put on your uniform. You chose pink socks with little grey kitties on it. Your boots would completely cover them, but it was still fun to you.

You re-folded the towels and thought to yourself about making a trip to the laundromat... with your parole guy. You pursed your lips, before resuming to quietly sing before you opened the door.

Battat was awake, browsing his phone while something sizzled in the pan in front of him. You quickly shut up.

"Mornin'," he sleepily greeted you without looking up.

"Good morning," you made your way into the kitchen, digging into the fridge for another tiny chocolate milk.

"Uh... did'ja sleep well?"

"Yeah. Thank you. I don't know why, but I've been just..." you stared at the medicine cabinet. "Keep having bad dreams lately."

Battat didn't immediately respond, careful with his words. "Do you... think it's, like, stress?"

You plucked your three bottles.

"Probably."

"Right."

While things were improving, they were still awkward. You were still relishing in your tiny win earlier, even if he may not have even remembered how he fell asleep. You were glad he was finally letting his walls down - even if it came at the cost of your sanity. Little victories, you thought.

"We'll be working closer to Tenna today," Battat said suddenly. "So it's a safe bet that nothing weird will happen." He turned to give you a crooked, reassuring smile - instead watching you taking your medicine.

"Uh, sorry if it's personal to ask," he stammered. "Is there a reason you take three-"

"Not much oxygen in my blood." You spoke a bit too quickly, curtly. "These don't exactly fix me, but they make it bearable."

"Right." He turned away, focused on fixing breakfast. "Sorry for prying."

"It's fine," you blurted, "it's just. Embarassing, I guess."

"I know."

You suddenly remembered him with his inhalers yesterday.

"Anyways, eggs and homefries. Grab us two plates, please."

You obediently grabbed two, and grabbed forks.

He seemed pleased. "Help yourself first."

Breakfast was pleasant. More of the two of you scrolling your phones, you even scored a couple smirks from him as you showed him what you would giggle at. You thanked him profusely for the breakfast as he got up, announcing it was his turn to shower. As soon as he closed the door, you jumped to your feet.

You quickly degloved and set to work. You washed the pan, the plates, the forks... you wanted it spotless, but you had to be quick. You didn't actually pay attention to how long the green Pippins showered, but you wanted to surprise him for once. Remembering your contributions to the grocery run, you sought out the ingredients.

Quickly, you sliced the long buns, and instead of butter, you used a combination of olive oil and salt. You neatly folded ham, cheese, lettuce with a quickly thrown together dressing (you gave it a quick taste test for good measure). Both sandwiches were identical, provided you weren't actually sure what he liked. You'd have to trial and error that one. You scrubbed your hands of the olive oil, thanking yourself for removing the gloves, before wrapping both up neatly. Then you washed your hands again, for good measure. Finally you put your gloves back on as you heard the water turn off. Practically vibrating with excitement, you waited until he came out.

Pippinses had mostly no hair, aside from eyelashes and light body hair, if only for protective purposes. The plastic and resin skin on your heads could only shine more when freshly washed. He was practically reflective. Similar to you, he only came out in a shirt, pants, socks, and gloves. His green vest and poncho waited for him on the back of the couch. He pretended to not immediately acknowledge you until he was buttoning up his vest. Finally, his curiosity won.

"Okay... so what's the deal - why do you look so happy?" He rolled on his heels, pretending to get a better look at you.

"Ta-da!" You moved to the side and motioned at the sandwiches. "Made us lunch."

His face was unreadable for a moment before his cheeks flushed. "Oh, thank you."

You grinned in response. That flush was all confirmation you needed he was more pleased than he was letting on. Endless wins for you today.

"Uh, we should get going," he stumbled as he threw on his poncho.

You nodded, packed up your lunches, and followed him out.

The stage was bustling with activity - the Weather Duo were shining onstage as they excitedly gave a very... amorous weather report. Something about needing an umbrella for tonight's "big splash". You smirked at the double entendre. How scandalous.

Battat preferred working quietly in the sound booth, so you were situated up there with him. You realized probation meant you couldn't even be doing a different activity in the same room - you had to be exactly in his line of sight at nearly all times. Battat had grown a little lax about that in private, but with Tenna in the room, he was suddenly very strict about it again. You didn't make a fuss, and simply followed him around like a loyal red shadow.

Tenna, at least, had been curious. He recognized you as you came in, if only because of Battat's pine green cloak making the two of you stick out. You merely by association.

"Ah-!" He gasped at the sight of you both. "Cardinal and Battat, was it?"

You were surprised by him actually bothering to remember your names. That was not something the CRT usually did - he'd normally only single out Pippinses by whatever made them different. Sunglasses. Visor. Bowtie. Green. Any kind of visual cue - even with Battat, you were surprised by the fact he remembered his name rather than just his coat colour.

You smiled sheepishly up at him. "Yessir."

He crouched down, shrinking a little in the process to be at a reasonable level with the two of you. "How are you two getting along? Are you keeping them out trouble?" The second question, you were certain, would've been paired with a wink if Tenna was capable of it. Instead, he settled for a mock-whisper and a low laugh track playing from his speakers.

Battat put on his best professional voice. "We've been getting along splendidly, sir," a mostly lie. You two did not get along at first. "They've been well behaved under my watch." He closed his eyes with a sweet smile. You didn't know he could do that.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Tenna clapped his hands once in delight. "I was worried by how scared little Cardinal looked, here..."

You weren't really used to people saying your name so much, you realized. You only nervously smiled in return, when Tenna turned his playful attention onto you.

"Greenie hasn't been too much of a meanie to you, has he?"

You sputtered and tried to withhold your laughter. Battat shot you an astonished glare, which only really made the struggle to not laugh more difficult.

"He's been good," you choked, trying to compose yourself. You put your fist in front of your mouth to hide your grin. "He keeps me out of trouble."

The iron and steel giant was satisfied with this, before sending you two off with a flourished goodbye. Quite literally, too, provided a flower sprung from his nose. He didn't bring up the incident, to your relief.

The sound booth was relaxing. It was comfortably sized for Pippinses - you wondered if that was because Pippinses did a lot of the work around here, at least regarding anything with computers, buttons, dials, mixing boards... smaller hands meant more percise work with buttons. The green Pippins beside you seemed in his element, even leaning over to handle controls before you had a chance to. You wondered if you should just lean back and let him do his thing, but you didn't want to give the impression of being a slacker. So instead, you batted his hand away and shot him a look.

"Oop, sorry," came the sheepish response.

When lunch came, you both decided to skip the cafeteria primarily due to already having your sandwiches. It was a bit more courteous to save seats for people actually buying their lunches. Battat had slipped both sandwiches into a messenger bag - not something he normally had on him, but you assumed today that was just because he wanted to make sure nobody could take the sandwiches you made from the break room fridge. Apparently a common occurence by the way he'd bitched about it on the elevator.

He lead you to a more isolated hallway, leaned against the wall, and sank down.

You joined wordlessly, crossing your legs as you seated yourself beside him.

He dug into the bag and pulled out two drinks, too. Carbonated strawberry lemonade for himself, and the peach energy drink for you.

"How'd you-"

"Before everything," he interrupted. "You'd give me drinks near daily like you were feeding a stray cat. I think I noticed what you got yourself."

You didn't have a response, just a laugh.

He handed you one of the sandwiches and examined the other.

"They're the exact same," you confessed. "I don't... actually know what you like. So I just made something simple that I like."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I appreciate it." He unwrapped his, before realizing you were staring. "Hahaha, so like... do you always watch guys eat-" a self-conscious attempt at a joke.

"NO!!" you squeaked. "I just wanted to see if you like it! Sheesh!!" Your voice dropped back to a mumble. "I have to keep my ratings good."

He stifled a laugh. "Now where'd you learn that line from..." Then he took a bite. He leaned back and closed his eyes and hummed. "This is really good, for the record."

You looked away bashfully. "It's nothing really..."

"What'd you make this with?"

"I used olive oil and salt instead of butter," you confessed. "And the lettuce is a simple homemade dressing."

He nodded. "I like it. A lot. Thank you." His compliment was earnest.

It tickled you.

You didn't respond with anything more than a content little noise, afraid your voice would give away that you were thrilled about you two finally becoming friends. Even if it was awkward and a bit uncomfortable and due to forced proximity and you were certain in normal circumstances he'd have never given you the time of day. Yeah. The point stood - you were beginning to get along in spite of your odd circumstances. His reassurance last night made you want to do nice things for him, even if it wasn't too much. To bridge the gap, essentially.

"Oh yeah!" You suddenly remembered. "Can we go to the laundromat downstairs later?"

"Good call," he covered his mouth as he spoke. "Would be nice to have my clothes all clean again."

You dumbly stared at each other.

You'd made the mistake of sharing two laundry bins, splitting lights from darks, effectively mixing your clothes.

"I didn't think this through."

"Me neither."

"How do we... tell whose white shirt is whose..."

"Yeah we fucked up. Maybe yours are the slightly bigger ones? Idunno. You're a bit taller..."

"At least the pants are yours," he lifted a pair. "Mine have numbers for sizes. Yours don't. "

You groaned. "And the sizes are inconsistent everywhere."

"You need to buy better pants somewhere else."

You shot him a glare and he shut up. They were already washed, haphazardly thrown in two washers together. It was only after as you were pulling them out of the machine to put them in the dryers did you feel like a pair of idiots.

"We can like, just not look...?"

"Are you stupid? We still have to seperate them when we fold them at home-"

"Okay, well, we only have two bins so we should just be mature about it-"

The sound of someone entering the laundromat other than you two made you both quickly abandon your bickering.

You both could see the head a Zapper, but they were talking to someone much smaller.

"Of course, dearie," the Zapper purred. "We can watch all th' movies you want tonight, til you feel better."

Your muscles relaxed, you had no reason to be afraid this time.

The other voice, small and feminine chirped in return - a Pippins, you recognized, but you didn't remember her name. "Ahh... I love you so much. Thanks, babe. I can't wait to get home," she groaned. "I need a heating pad and cuddles so bad."

"Aww... s'okay, dearie," the Zapper replied. You definitely didn't know her name, but you did know this particular Zapper was a girl, too. "I'll give yous all the cuddles when we're back." You could hear her electronic whirring as she lovingly wobbled her head.

You leaned to whisper to Battat.

"They're a cute couple, that's not the same Zapper, I don't think..."

He nodded and his muscles relaxed, as he turned to study your expression, his own unreadable.

Battat quickly turned to your shared laundry before tossing them into two dryer machines. He quickly adjusted the settings. "Tomorrow's the weekend," he commented. "Any plans?"

"Not really." You frowned. "I guess just staying in and playing video games?"

He didn't have an answer for that, only nodding in response.

"I have... a couple multiplayer," you offered. "Like, downloaded ones that you didn't see in my pitiful collection," you laughed uncomfortably.

He snorted. "That'd be fun to check out."

"Sounds like a plan."

When you got home, sorting your clothes was every bit as much of an awkward disaster as you both expected. But it didn't matter, you got the job done and quickly made haste to your rooms. After putting away everything, you finally got into pajamas. Just red flannel pants and a black band shirt, and long, black gloves that reached under your shirt sleeves for full coverage.

You let out a long yawn before opening your door.

Battat was setting up his laptop.

"I'll be out here for a while." He stated quietly.

"I'll keep my door open, then..." you trailed off. "I think I sleep better knowing someone's nearby. At least for now."

"Don't blame ya." He looked up at you for a moment, expression unreadable before he looked away quickly. "Goodnight."

"Sleep tight, whenever you do."

Knowing he was out there, still awake, quietly tapping away and listening to some audio you could barely hear really did help. You slept soundly again.

Chapter 7: Video games

Chapter Summary

> WOOO big chapter again! I had bad carpal tunnel so I had to slow it down and couldn't reply to comments. I hope this chapter is nice food for you!! Blows kisses to the 5 people who enjoy my work

Saturday morning.

Battat left the under-cabinet lights on again. You wandered out to the main room.

He wasn't out there anymore - his door closed, but dim light crawled from under the door. He must be sleeping, or something. You stood silently near his door only to be greeted by the faint sound of his snoring.

It was past the time you'd both usually be up for work, but due to the endless night of dark worlds, you'd only ever known because of clocks, alarms, and your body's natural sleep cycle. You wandered to the washroom to brush your teeth, shower, and ambled back out in the same pajamas. You were out of the tiny chocolate milk cartons, to your dismay. You settled on pomegrante juice - its taste sharply contradicting the minty flavour still in your mouth, but it hardly mattered. It worked for taking medicine and getting some sugar in you.

You dug around for cereal, and happily settled on a cinnamon flavoured one. You were halfway through when Battat opened his door and shuffled out.

He was only in green plaid pajama pants, and an oversized TV Time shirt. He looked like a dork. His gloves were a bit more loose around his elbows, like he was too lazy to adjust them... until his eyes met with yours, then he hastily fixed them. You pretended not to notice.

"Good morning," you chirped.

"Mornin'," came his lazy response.

You resumed flipping through videos, snorting at some of the antics you saw. He decided to follow your lead and lazily stick to cereal this morning - opting for the same one.

He sat beside you, and was a few spoonfuls in his breakfast before he quietly, and notably uncomfortably asked, "so uh... did you wanna... uh. Play games together...?"

You lit up, fist slamming the table in excitement - Battat was wide-eyed and startled by your enthusiasm. "I thought you'd never ask!"

So that was your day after getting your console hooked up to the television: introducing him to your favourite PvPs, co-ops, but the one you were most excited about sharing was an alien roguelite. There was excessive lore in the monster, item, environment logs - brain candy for your nerdy green companion. And you were right. He was fully invested, asking to pause every time he picked up something new to flip through the logbook. He even sat closer to the television to get a good look at everything happening. Even the music had him enthralled. It tickled you that he kept asking to do "just one more round". Several hours passed before a knock at the door caught your attention.

You paused the game, as Battat stood up. "I'll get it," he volunteered. He paused, looked down at himself, before he shrugged and went to answer anyway. In that moment, you realized you both were still in pajamas the whole morning.

"Hello?" Battat greeted the visitor awkwardly.

"Afternoon," the gruff but kind voice responded. "I was wondering if Cardinal's here-"

You bolted upright in delight. "Rye!! Come on in!" You called excitedly, a grin forming on your face. "We're just gamin' today."

"Is it awright I come in?" He asked shyly.

"I just said so!"

Battat nodded in agreement with you, stepping aside to let the bigger red Pippins in.

"Sorry we're uh... indecent," Battat looked embarassed.

Rye took a moment to look at you both, his cheeks turning red. "Oh- in that case I can-"

"No no nonono I meant in pajamas-"

Why were the boys like this.

"Oh my god don't be weird," you groaned. "Anyways, come sit with us," you dramatically patted the couch for emphasis. "I'm dragging Battat through DLC bosses. I thought staying in for today seemed like a nicer idea."

Rye seemed pleased. "Good, now we finally have more people to play with."

You laughed loudly. "You'd be shocked, dude! Batt picked this up quickly?! I expected the learning curve to get him, but-"

"It's literally just shoot bugs and get items," Battat flushed as he quickly jumped to his own defense.

"Still," you purred. "I'm just glad you're enjoying yourself."

He stared blankly before he furrowed his brow and waved dismissively. "Whatever!"

Your gaze turned to Rye. "Wanna join the next run?"

"I sure do, buddy." He got himself situated next to you. "How've you been feeling? You've been looking kind of gaunt..."

"I'm okay," you hummed as you unpaused.

Battat lounged lazily on the other side of the L shaped couch, his head supported by two stacked pillows, and his legs crossed over the armrest. He was hunting around for treasure chests and coolly picking out what he was and wasn't leaving for you. He was keen on optimizing his defense after he learnt his survivor was the lowest health. It was nice seeing him actually be invested.

"I've been... a little lethargic, but I'll be fine. I'll see a doctor soon." You promised as you tore up a stone titan. "It's likely just stress. I'm sure I'm fine."

Rye mulled on it before he responded. "You've always been sick... but I want you to not neglect it for too long, 'kay? It scares me."

You nodded. "I won't. Promise. How've you been anyhow? Sorry for not getting to see you as much..."

"Ahaha, I'm fine. Picking at the guitar more," Rye smiled as he watched you effortlessly shoot down enemies, but you knew he was trying to hide his concern. "I should bring it over sometime."

"Uh, yeah? That'd be so sick," you smiled back. "Battat, you should hear Rye play. He's a really good guitarist."

"Aw, shucks,"

Battat absently nodded. "Sounds cool. Sure."

You turned your attention back to Rye as you continued, keeping an eye on your bandit. "Anything else new?"

"Not really, haha. Typical Pippins drama in the lunchroom as usual. It's been lonelier not seeing you around as much."

"Well, now you can come harass me anytime."

"Ahaha. I am too lazy to harass. But if I can vibe then that's all good." Rye smiled sweetly.

"Are you still seeing that one Pippins?" You hummed. "Battat, get the teleporter."

"On it." Was Battat's sharp reply. He was lazer-focused. The ground in-game shook.

"Nah," Rye answered. "He was only looking for sex, and I wasn't really into that. I want something... nicer, y'know?"

"Yeah, I feel that, I used to-" you remembered Battat's presence. "I just want something serious now," you interrupted yourself awkwardly. The idea of Battat knowing you used to enjoy those raunchy parties with other Pippins was something you realized embarassed you greatly. At least given you weren't really close - he barely knew you. He probably had an idea, or heard rumours, but still. You'd rather he just think you were there for the drinks and gambling. But there was truth to your statement, though; you weren't actively looking, but you did want something more serious.

Rye pretended to not notice your stumbling as you glared at the screen more focused.

"Yeah..." he thought about it. "You finally want to settle down with someone? That's good-"

"Finally?!?!" You sputtered. "I've always!!! Preferred!! That!!! But I have no someone!!!"

Rye bellowed a jolly laugh. "I mean- you brought it up!"

"Well!! Let's talk about something else! Also, Battat, grab the ukelele and will-of-the-wisp I marked, they'll help you clear crowds."

"What do they do?"

"Uhh so the ukelele links attacks to other enemies-"

"And the wisp causes them to explode and hit other enemies," Rye finished. "Super useful no matter what survivor you're playing as."

"Oh. Thanks." Battat jumped out of the swarm to race across the map. You hoped he was otherwise tuning you out.

"But yeah, think I'm just done with men for now," Rye hummed. "I can be single for a while if it means something better comes."

You nodded. "That's fair."

"Did you hear about what happened to Tenna recently?"

"No, actually?"

"One of his wires melted," Rye's concern was apparent. "Mike had to go patch him up. Made some real ugly screeches. It had to hurt like a bitch. Felt awful hearing Tenna suffering like that."

"Ugh, seriously." Battat joined. "You ever touch his wires? When he's broken? Basically burns your hands. Even through gloves. I've studied manuals to get a feel for fixing him in- in case Mike can't,"

Something about his phrasing made you pause.

"Why wouldn't he?" You tested. "Mike's around him all the time?"

"Yeah well," Battat trailed off for a moment, pretending he was struggling more with the monsters more than he actually was. "Sometimes there are times Mike's not always there."

You pursed your lips.

"Anyways," Battat carried on. "You said there were three stages to the DLC boss? And this is the third stage, right?"

"Yes," you confirmed.

"So," Rye began. "Enemies will spawn at the boss level. Run past all of them, the longer you linger, your drones will get hit. Card has fireworks so you wanna save the drones, because reviving them will hurt the boss. You've seen the fireworks yeah?"

Battat nodded. "Not entirely sure what they do, but yeah." His character was obediently following yours on the television.

"They send firework projectiles at enemies, near or far, anytime you spend money or interact with things."

"Ohh! That makes sense. Do they stack?"

"I think so, but one's usually enough."

The boys continued talking - Battat asking questions, Rye patiently answering them more informatively than you could. You leaned back and lead the way to the boss.

"Hide behind the pillars when the screen lights up!"

"Keep running around him!"

"Restore the drones!"

"Use your boomerang, Batt!!"

Battat only barely survived and you ran the show.

Finally, Rye was able to join you.

"Wait, before we start, I gotta use the washroom," Battat said before he got up, and made his way out.

The door closed, and Rye waited a moment before speaking.

"You two are getting along," the red die observed.

"Kinda, yeah," you mumbled. "He's not so bad."

"I was wrong." He hummed pleasantly. "He is giving you the time of day. But I was right that you'd crack him."

"Contradictory statements," you exhaled in response with a small laugh. "I don't know if we're even friends..."

"You're in pajamas playing video games together all day on a Saturday. Of course you're friends."

You smiled to yourself at the thought.

"I don't know if he'd admit that, though... but the thought is nice, haha."

"He's definitely warmer to you than me still," Rye patted your shoulder playfully. "But you live with him. I'd be concerned if he didn't eventually relax around you, yanno?"

You nodded. You both shut up quickly when you heard the toilet flush and the sink start running.

"I just hope we get along well."

When Battat came out, the next few hours were dedicated to a three-person co-op. You and Rye carried Battat while still patiently answering his questions. The evening rolled around quickly, and Rye finally got up and ready to go home, while Battat decided to read the in-game logs for lore. You wondered if maybe he was just trying to respectfully not intrude on your time with your friend.

"It's a real relief seein' ya," Rye murmured as he hugged you at the door. "I've been bothered since you told me you got chased. I'm sorry I wasn't there."

You frowned at nothing in particular. "I don't think anything would've prevented it... I guess you'd have kept me from freaking out and making it worse, right?" You laughed weakly.

He smiled and raised two fists. "Not even a Zapper can bypass me, bud. Just take care of yourself, okay?"

"I'll try."

"I don't think Greenie's gonna let anything happen to ya. So I'll leave you in his hands. But if he hurts ya..." he shook his right fist, the other already retreated into his pants pocket.

"Oh god, shut up," you laughed, but you still peeked at Battat. You two were speaking too quietly for him to hear all the way across the apartment, and he was still reading and flipping through logs on the games screen. "I doubt he will. But thanks, Rye. Please come around again." You smiled up at your friend.

"I will on weekends." The red Pippins reassured. "See ya tomorrow!"

And he was gone.

You turned and made your way back to Battat.

"What should we do for dinner?" He asked.

Oh, right.

"Not sure," you rested your chin on your gloved hand in thought. "What are you feelin'?"

"Maybe we could do takeout," he mused. "Or we could go out...? We'll have to be, uh. Presentable." The green die snorted with his followup.

"Presentable's my middle name," you scoffed.

"That abused poncho says otherwise."

"Wh- I have a non tattered one!" You barked. "Hold on!"

You stormed to your room, and quickly changed. You grabbed a nice red poncho, untattered, still soft and thick. Sheltered from your wear and tear. The fabric was still vibrant red and black, the inside lined with a faux fur to keep you warm while you headed out. You stepped out of your room, as he stepped out of his own, pulling up his green gloves and adjusting his own poncho.

He smirked up at you.

Your heart fluttered wildly - maybe he was warming up to you.

"Let's go then. Y'know the plaza out front? Like, right at the entrance of TV world?"

"Oh, right?"

"It's the newer Greek place. I've been wanting to try it."

Did this count as friendship?

No... hardly. You were barely friends. You were going out with your roommate - better worded, your parole officer - for dinner because neither of you felt like making it. It was an operation of laziness, really. It just required some walking. He said he already wanted to try it - and he couldn't leave you alone. Boss' orders. You'd have no choice but be his shadow anyway. Following instructions in a situation that was still unfair. If you weren't tethered to him as punishment, maybe this could've been more hopeful. He was obligated to drag you wherever he wanted, or to tag along wherever you wanted... mostly. You'd hoped good behaviour could get you out of this sooner, but now you didn't really mind it. But it meant any bonding made you second guess his intentions, whether he was sincere or only tolerating you out of obligation.

You deflated at the thought.

"What's the matter?" He eyed you with feigned disinterest.

"Nothing."

"Suit yourself."

Uuugh.

Getting off the elevators, he lead you outside - down the snowy front steps, through the lit up plaza that lovingly wrapped around TV World.

You almost never came here. It was a marvel to you every time, even if you had to ask if you could hold onto his arm to avoid slipping. He shrugged and offered his arm. There were lights everywhere - Pippinses, Shadowguys, and even some Zappers were all walking around, bundled up in groups inside and outside shops and restaurants. You knew this was where Tenna liked to browse on his free time and that was really it. There were arcades, restaurants both fast food and fancy alike, funky little shops, a health clinic, a tiny museum (mostly of TV related displays...), an aquarium, even, and a store for local darkners to buy decorations and hosuehold necessities.

There were some stores and places inside the main building where everyone worked and lived - like a grocery store, the laundromat, indoor pools, a gym, a pharmacy. Many residential floors. But TV world had a sizable amount of Darkners present, so it had to have everything in terms of accommodation, variety, stimulation. It almost seemed right that Tenna had made the plaza to give extra life to this place - it was also a decent excuse for darkners of other worlds to make quick visits, as long as they didn't stay too long and petrify after a couple days.

You mainly didn't come out here often due to your shitty health. You didn't have the energy most of the time. You didn't right now, really, but holding onto Battat and the promise of a meal meant you'd be fine.

Heavy snowfall softened some of the noise of busy darkners chatting, goofing off, playing around, reducing the sounds to not be overbearing. The odd loud laugh or playful screech could be heard. Yet, it was serene.

Your green companion tugged on his scarf and expertly navigated you down the plaza to a cute little restaurant.

"It's casual, and I've heard good things," he mumbled. "Mainly from Pluey."

You merely nodded in response.

Once inside, you were greeted with warmth and the smell of spices and meat. It was divine. Your eyes drifted up to the hanging menu as two Shadowguys were busy cooking, and a Pippins in all black, no poncho, took your orders. You went for the chicken souvlaki, and he went for the lamb. You both got simple drinks - iced teas.

The Pippins at the front told you to go sit and your food will be brought to you - so you did. Battat picked out a small table for two, a bit isolated from the busier tables at the front. The worker came by with the iced teas, first, moments after you'd sat down.

Battat avoided your gaze as he sat and swirled the straw absentmindedly.

You decided to do the same.

"What made you wanna try this place?" You suddenly asked, still looking down.

"Oh, Pluey really likes it." He responded. He looked up at you. "He and Jongler like making me try new things."

"Doesn't Jongler... not..."

"Have a mouth, yeah," he tapped his claws thoughtfully, the fabric of his gloves making a soft tp tp tp sound. "I'm actually not sure. They say they like certain foods. But I've never actually seen them eat."

"What if the way Zappers eat is like. Extra scary?"

"Oh yeah, true. Better not scare us Pippinses." He rolled his eyes, before realizing what he said. "You have a valid reason, though-"

You laughed uncomfortably. "Hopefully my bad experiences with them is done, at least? Yesterday went fine and today, well..."

"We were inside. Safe 'n' sound." He smiled reassuringly. "Tomorrow we can do whatever you want, I guess."

"I'm pretty lazy," you smirked. "Not like TV world is super enthralling when it's not like, consumer hell."

He laughed. "True."

You shut up as a shadow guy came with two little salad bowls. "Oh-?"

"Pluey said they give a salad with like... every meal," he eyed his hungrily, pitching his fork through several leaves and a tomato.

You gently moved the black olives to the side.

"You're not gonna eat those?!" He sounded almost offended.

"They're like, too sweet for me, they're not bad, just-"

"Can I have them." His determined expression made you sputter a laugh - it was hardly even a question! Just a statement at this point!

"Sure," laughter rocked your body as he haphazardly tried scooping them out of your bowl. He was doing it, sure. But the olives threatened to wobble off his fork, eliciting his evergreen eyes widening, mouth in an O shape as his focus became razor sharp. The sight was incredibly entertaining.

You tried to eat around his snail-like movements, only for him to drop it anyway. Then he gasped in horror. You tried not to choke.

"Not funny!!" He barked.

That tipped you over. You had to turn away and wheeze.

"You love my suffering," he groaned. "You also laughed whenever I died-"

"SORRY sorry," you gasped, still reclaiming your breath. "It feels like yesterday when you hated me and now I see you being a goober, it's like, hysterical to me."

"Slow down on the slurs," he playfully accused, trying to keep a straight face.

"Wh-"

"The g word."

"Oh my god, that's not even a bad word you idiot," you chuckled.

"Calling me a goober is forbidden. I'll report you to Tenna for bad words. Then we'll have to put you in the dungeon."

You giggled and gently kicked him under the table. Your back and forth play bickering continued throughout dinner - which was heavenly. You had to close your eyes and savour the flavour. It'd been so long since things felt... normal. Since things felt warm, kind, friendly. It really felt like Battat was more than just some guy forced to keep an eye on you.

It felt like friendship.

You both paid and left, he held out his arm to help you make your way through the slippery ground on your way back. The food helped a lot, too, your energy was replenished.

When you'd gotten home, taken your shoes off at the door, something itched at you. You had to know.

"Uh, Battat...?"

"Hm?" He was taking off his poncho.

"Are we... friends?"

He went quiet, thinking about it.

"I guess we are. Kinda."

"Sorry for dragging you into my mess." Your voice was quiet, soft, suddenly filled with sorrow.

"It's fine," he dismissed you with a hand wave. "We both made a friend out of a bad situation." His crooked smile felt like a wave of relief.

"Yeah. Silver linings."

Sunday was the same - you both spent the entire day inside, playing video games. He was still hooked on the alien roguelite, and you didn't mind. It was fun watching him struggle, and still being pretty decently skilled to overcome the steep learning curve. He made rigatoni pasta for dinner. You envied whoever would take his heart someday as you scarfed down seconds. Your purple blanket was still a no-show.

Monday, you were back to work. You were his loyal shadow. You got coffees in the morning and stayed working in audio. Tenna was delighted to see you both again, and the Weather Duo recognized you this time. Even if not by name. You were worried how little they knew of your situation, you realized, as you caught something about "lovebirds". How optimistic. You were just newfound friends.

Tuesday was uneventful. A slower day, mostly news broadcasts and Jongler seemed to be constantly asking Battat for advice over the phone. You wondered if they were okay, but when they visited the apartment that night, things seemed fine. So you didn't pry. Pluey continued to be a flirt, even making you hide your face from embarassment at one point. God damn it. You had a soft spot for Shadowguys. Still, your blanket never returned. You had already decided you didn't want to ask about it, but you did miss it.

Wednesday gave you chills. You couldn't explain it, but you felt like you were being watched. But you were safe as long as you stuck to your friends like glue - so sitting between Battat and Rye reinforced your comfort. Poutine soothed the soul that lunch. Battat picked up on your paranoia, and called Mike to come hang around for a bit. The massive cowboy barely spoke, but was very kind to you.

"Sometimes I wish he'd be a little fat dude again." You commented later, when you and Battat were alone. "He's cuter like that."

Battat's jaw dropped. "He's WHAT?"

"Like, he's got cute little lovehandles, like," you held up your claws in the air, gesturing grabbing something with both hands. "Sometimes I just wanted to do this while he yells at me-"

"You CAN'T talk about our MANAGER like that!!" He seemed incredibly flustered - like the idea was actively causing him pain.

You decided to mess with him. "We can share him, yknow-"

"NO!!!"

You burst into loud laughter as he buried his face in his claws.

On Thursday, you fell. Battat hadn't been paying attention, and you slipped down the stairs leading up to audio.

"Are you okay?!" He hurriedly set down both your coffees on the stairs and came to your aid.

"I'll feel it in the morning," you gasped. "But I'll be fine. I think."

He nodded firmly, face contorted in concern.

"Please be careful," he murmured as he helped you up. He abandoned the coffees, at least until he made sure you were in the audio booth and finally seated. Only then did he awkwardly jog back out to retrieve them.

Friday, you were still sore. But something perturbed you deeply.

You and Battat worked with the cameras, much to his concern - he knew you were tender from falling down the stairs. You could see him peering over at you every so often. The day was going fine, nothing out of the ordinary otherwise. You went to lunch, ate with Rye and Battat, came back to the stage room... Only to find a note under the camera you'd set down.

"YOURE DEAD MEAT" written in all capitals, rigid straight lines, like someone was infuriated as they wrote it. The penmanship left deep indents in the paper - written with force.

Your blood went cold.

"What the fuck?" Battat read over your shoulder, sharply inhaling. "That's gotta be a prank." Despite trying to dismiss it, his expression betrayed him. The green die was disturbed. This only caused you to spiral further.

You didn't say a word. You shook as you held the note, chest beginning to heave. What on earth...

The Zapper. It had to be.

The room spun.

"Whoa whoa whoa," Battat's voice was muffled. "Come on, sit down," was he speaking gently? You couldn't tell. "You're gonna be okay. It's some fucked up prank. Probably the other Pippinses. It's okay. Look at me. You're okay." He took the note from you. You couldn't concentrate.

He shoved it in his own pocket, while his other hand stayed on your shoulder. Then both hands were on your shoulders.

"You're okay. Okay? We'll get to the bottom of this- or, I will, I don't want you stressing anymore, okay? Buddy?"

You stared at his shoulder, nodding emptily. The room was still blurry. He was begging for you to come back while you sat in front of him.

Unfortunately, the tiny commotion between you two caught Tenna's attention. The massive CRTs screen made its way into view, as Battat moved out of the way.

"Hi sweetheart," his voice was staticy from how soft he was trying to speak. "Are you alright? Are you sick?"

"... think sick," Battat tried to cover for you. "They're sweating..." he looked upset.

You were trying really hard to break out of your trance but you felt paralyzed. It was hard. You nodded numbly.

"Do you need to go home?" He offered. "Can't have you working like this..."

"That'd be good," Battat said quickly. "They look like they're gonna hurl or faint..."

He was right. You did feel like you were gonna faint, at least.

"Come on," Battat held out his arms so you could grab them. "Grab onto me."

You weakly obliged. He quickly shuffled to get his arm around your back, and your arm over his shoulders. You were shutting down in fear.

"Please make sure they rest," Tenna wrung his hands. "It's Friday, at least, so get lots of relaxation, I hope you feel better! Poor thing..."

The weather duo whispered amongst themselves as Battat tried to haul you out.

"Listen," Battat whispered. "If you can't help it, that's fine, but I'm afraid of vomit, so... please don't puke on me?"

"No promises." You felt him jolt underneath you. You were too weak to laugh. "Kidding. I'm just. Chest pains. Bad."

"Right. Let's getcha upstairs, then.."

You felt like you were being watched the entire way home, the entire way up the elevator, and even down the residential floor as Battat gently walked you home. His hand squeezed your side reassuringly, trying to hold you tighter against him, keeping you steady.

"We can watch movies, nap, browse videos, whatever," Battat whispered. His tone sounded somewhat desperate. "You're gonna be alright. It was just a fucked up prank. I won't let anything happen to you."

You nodded pathetically.

You hated how easily this got to you.

He took off his shoes and held you steady as you kicked off your boots. He helped you out of your poncho and took off his own, guiding you to your bedroom.

"Get into something comfortable," he softly ordered. "We aren't going out today. Or tomorrow. Okay?"

You looked at him pathetically and nodded.

You changed into an oversized shirt and shorts. Black gloves, simple red and white socks.

When you left your room, he was just leaving his own - he'd changed, too. He was still on the move, though, draping blankets onto the couch, setting up pillows at different ends. One spot for you, one spot for him. You watched silently, still trying to focus on him instead of the harrowing, gutting feeling swirling inside you: someone was after you. And it was that Zapper. All you could keep doing was hide and pretend things were fine. Surely Battat couldn't fight off a Zapper - maybe Pluey and Jongler. They definitely knew something was up already. You wondered if Battat intended on telling them what happened today. Probably.

"Make yourself comfortable," Battat ordered. You walked to the corner of the couch and gingerly sat down, pulled up your legs and stared forward.

He returned with a bowl of sweets - nothing special, just candies he'd bought.

He set it on the table and crouched down in front of you. "Is there anything you wanna do? Anything at all?"

Your eyes threatened to water. "I just don't wanna think anymore."

His expression had never looked so forlorn, but he tried to cover it quickly.

"Hoow about, uhh.... I play something, you watch, you don't gotta think even for a second."

You smiled pitifully. "Sounds nice."

He nodded dutifully, before getting up to turn on an older console, already set aside - you wondered when he put it there. But it took him no time to switch the wires to hook it up. He blew on the cartridge. "This is a fun one," he hummed. "Y'know the deal - paper Italian plumber, they released this in 2000. Very cute, fun, I think you'd like it. I replay it every holiday season."

"I know this one," you mumbled.

"Great." He grinned crookedly. "Now you get to experience it with your good pal: me!"

You exhaled a small, trembly laugh.

It took a couple hours, but eventually, you fell asleep. The characters and scenes began to blur not long after the dialogue did. But the gentle, whimsical music settled your mind. When you awoke, he'd paused it, probably not long after you'd passed out.

Hours must've passed, though, considering he was still wide awake when you'd dozed off. He was asleep with his phone in his claws, draped over his chest, on the other side of the couch. In that moment, it felt like not only the game, but the world was on pause. Batt's peaceful expression and gentle snoring made you forget what was wrong in the first place.

You drifted back to sleep.

Chapter 8: Condoling

Chapter Summary

I basically jumped to write this

Saturday.

You woke up with anxiety still clawing at you. You brushed your teeth, and decided you weren't hungry. Forgot your medicine.

Battat was still coming back to life as you left the washroom. He looked at you and mumbled something incoherently.

"Mornin'."

"Moornin'," he groaned. "Sleep kay?"

"Mostly. You?"

"Mhmm..." he hummed contentedly, before taking a deep breath and hauling himself up.

You watched him float to the bathroom, and you went to your room. You decided to dress in normal clothes, just to feel any degree normal. Anything. Thoughts of yesterday coiled around your mind and you desperately wanted to look away, a distraction, any semblance of normal that wasn't coming. The illusion had, for now, been shattered. It left a hopeless feeling. The paranoia had escalated now that you knew there was definitely a threat behind the Zapper's actions. You stared emptily at your clothes.

What do you even do now? It was after you. Did it know where you lived...? It had to. It had to also know you were living with Battat. But why? Why was it doing this? Surely if it was mad over the crash, you'd already been punished? Or was that not enough? Did it already want to hurt you the day it chased you in the first place? Your claws dug into your gloves. Can you even confront something that wants to - and easily could - kill you? Should you let it kill you so Battat can live a normal- you shuddered. Was he in danger now because of you?

You'd ruined his life so much already.

You swallowed hard.

"Uh, hey, you okay in there-"

Battat pushed his head through the semi open door, just to squeak apologies in embarassment and ducked back out quickly.

Right. You'd been getting changed. Your bare back to the door, pants on, gloves still up to your biceps. A flustered feeling couldn't fully penetrate your thoughts, but your cheeks and neck warmed up in shame. Should've closed the door fully - he probably also could've knocked. But a small part of you didn't care.

You said nothing and threw on a shirt, expertly buttoning it all the way up. You didn't care about the vest, but chose a more "casual" poncho today. All black, like the rest of your clothes. Goth look for today, you supposed.

You drifted out of your room.

"Uhh, sorry," Battat was still stammering by the coffee pot. "I didn't- the door was open- sorry- i should've knocked-"

"I don't care," you stated. Your voice was firm but soft: sincere. "I'm not mad."

This only seemed to make him sputter more before turning away to focus on making his coffee.

"I was just lost in thought, sorry," you added.

This seemed to catch his attention. "If it's about yesterday, try not to worry- I'll get to the bottom of it," he promised. "If there's one thing I'm good at, it's digging for answers."

You smiled weakly and nodded.

"So I've like, got connections," he whirled around, a crazed look in his eyes. "And I can crack this. So you don't have to. I WILL find this guy. And I WILL put a stop to his stalky creepy behaviour. You won't have to lift a finger! I also can get access to all the security footage if it helps!" He slammed a fist into his palm. "I don't want you worrying, I will crack this case even if it means I'm hunting for amswers forever... which I won't. Because I'm efficient."

You couldn't tell if he was saying this to reassure you, or himself. Still, it soothed you enough that your shoulders untensed.

A rapid knock at the door and voices caught you both off guard.

"I'll get it!" Battat leapt towards the door. You wondered if this was his natural state and he was just finally letting you see it, or if he was working overtime to keep you from spiralling again.

Three darkners pooled into the apartment - Pluey, Jongler, and Rye. You felt relief at the sight of all of them- Pluey rushed to you first, brushing past Rye. Rye looked surprised before laughing as he caught the last glimpse of your face before you were pulled into the Shadowguy's arms and spun in the air. His shadowy cheek pressed against yours as he held you tight.

Battat was mumbling something to Jongler as he locked the doors. Jongler, you saw in blurry motions, was hunched over in concern.

Pluey's trilling dragged your attention back to him - despite him already spinning you around.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," you wheezed into his ear. "Thank you, Plues."

He finally set you down, and in a motion that sent butterflies through you, planted a shadowy kiss on your forehead. You really wondered if he was... no. Ignore it. He trilled similarly to a purr as he assessed you quickly to make sure you were unharmed. Your face flushed.

Rye finally stepped in. "I think they're awright," he laughed. He was entertained. Bastard. "I heard about yesterday. You got sick at work." He smiled sympathetically.

"Worse," you mumbled.

"Huh?" Rye tilted his head. Pluey maneuvered to wrap an arm around you protectively.

"Pluey... you and Jongler already know, don't you? Batt told you?"

Pluey nodded, his grin shifting into a frown.

"Know what?" Rye questioned.

"Someone threatened me." You stared downward, unwilling to meet Rye's eyes. "After lunch. Battat and I went back to the stageroom. Someone left a note under my camera..."

"What'd it say?"

Pluey answered in a small musical hum - a lower rumble. Battat definitely told him. You knew Pluey was a flirt, but the big greeting told you he had been genuinely relieved seeing you after what he heard.

Rye's face contorted before he composed his expression.

"Where's it now?"

"I... don't know-"

"I have it." Battat answered. He was scowling. You hadn't seen that expression in a while. "Let's get comfortable and figure something out."

Everyone sat at the couch. Battat squinted at Pluey hogging you to himself. You shrugged at Battat before he rolled his eyes and began.

"Okay, so-"

"Why are there blankets and pillows everywhere? Didja have a sleep over-"

"Shut up and stay on topic!"

"The topic's not even started, boss-"

"What did I say about calling me that in front of others?!"

Jongler wobbled their head playfully. "Sorry, boss-"

Battat loudly groaned in exasperation. "Anyways!!" He slammed a fist on his leg. "The Zapper. The one after Cardinal here. What is everyone's theories?"

"Gone rogue?" Rye offered.

Pluey's trill indicated he suspected malfunctioning, settings on to kill. He just wasn't sure why.

"You know what's funny..." Jongler began. "I've never seen anythin' outta the ordinary. None of the Zappas I see are particularly hostile... since da Pippins are usually rulebreakers, we ain't s'pposeda be friendly... but none of 'em Zappas I been around have shown red flags..." they whirred in concern. "Theys been talkin' like normal. One even has a Pippins girlfriend. But none seem..."

"Like they want to kill me." You breathed.

"Right..." Jongler whirred. "I been keepin' an eye open. But nothin's stood out..."

"Is it because they know you and that Pippins-dater are... well, friendly with Pippins?" Rye asked thoughtfully.

"Thinks so."

Battat rubbed his chin in thought. "If I wanted to kill a Pippins... I don't think I'd make it obvious around anyone friendly with Pippins. That's a good thought. How many Zappers are employed here, Jongler?"

"Hmm. Twelve."

"Only twelve?"

"No more no less."

Battat hummed. "Can you get me records on every Zapper?" He shot a wink to Pluey and Jongler.

Pluey trilled.

"How are you even able to do that? None of us should have access to employee records." Rye frowned.

"Let's just say, I got connections. We have Mike on our side." He smirked smugly.

"Why isn't he here with us then? Surely he could just get Tenna to banish that Zapper-"

"Well!!" Battat said quickly. "Mike's a busy guy! He doesn't have the time to investigate the way we do! So we can give him the evidence when we figure out who it is."

"Right," Rye nodded. "Makes sense."

Battat fixed his gaze on you. "You're going to be alright. We are going to keep you safe." His affirmations made you desperately wish that worked out.

Everyone stayed in your apartment today. Battat and Rye went crazy on the roguelite, Jongler watched. Pluey was basically glued to you. You didn't mind.

Battat occasionally made a face about it but said nothing.

You decided to take a nap, head resting against Pluey's stomach while familiar survivors and environments flashed across the television, familiar music and the boys bickering kept your mind steady. Occasionally Jongler would comment in support of whoever they found funnier, only to earn defensive, "just whose side are you on?!?!"s from Battat. The sound made you giggle.

As you drifted to sleep, you watched Battat closely.

No longer was he the pissed off, prickly, inhospitable coworker you knew.

He was relaxed. Laughing, goofing off - his quick ire was still present whenever he'd get laughed at, or died in game, but he was whirling around to fire quips at Jongler or Pluey, his lips curved up in an uneven grin. Mere weeks ago, you'd have never expected to spend weekends in pajamas playing games with him, surrounded by friends, in a cozy setting like this. You didn't know you'd eventually find comfort in his sleeping presence, his gentle snores, the way he liked to lazily lounge - a far cry from the smarmy, rude, uptight coworker. You didn't know you'd come to adore his cooking, being in his presence. His late night tapping away at a laptop, the conspiracy videos he'd always be listening to... even today, his enthusiasm for "cracking the case" regarding the threats you were under. It was an uphill battle, but you felt... relieved, that he was working so hard.

You still couldn't name the feelings that threatened to swarm your stomach when your gaze lingered a little too long. Hope, maybe?

When this is all over, you thought, it'd be nice to spend time with him. Without obligations. Just the simple desire to hang out. You smiled and drifted off.

Pluey rustling beneath you woke you back up. You looked up at him - he was trying to wriggle out from under you so he could get up.

Battat was making food in the kitchen, and Jongler and Rye were talking, seemingly unaware of you.

"I've been lookin 'round just in case..." Jongler's voice was low. "When Plues told me about the closet incident, I been scared since..."

"The closet incident?" Rye murmured back.

"Yeah. Batt's left Card'nal in da broom closet. Had to, for an emergency I was havin'. Big boss wires melted. He had to come emergency patch 'im up."

"Why'd he not just bring Card, then?"

"Couldn't. Big boss doesn't like us seein his wires if it can be helped."

"Ah, that's fair. But what else happened?"

"He covered up Card'nal, with the intent to hide 'em. But that Zappa came..."

"Did they hurt them?!"

"No, no." Jongler tried to assure. "Plues intervened. He knew Card'nal was hidin'. He says the Zappa had his head pressed against th' door, beepin maniacally."

Rye audibly shuddered. "But he couldn't tell they were in there, right? They were hidden, door closed, no?"

"Well, dat's da thing..." Jongler wrung their hands uncomfortably. "We gots heat vision. We can see through da walls. We know when a Pippins is causin' trouble. Doesn't matter if theys hidin'. Sometimes we just pretend we don't notice."

They... can see through walls? They have heat vision?

It knew you were there?

And was just fucking with you?

Your head spun. You were glad you were already laying down, but your breath hitched - giving away your eavesdropping.

"Oh, Card'nal," Jongler exclaimed.

"You're awake!" Rye leaned over to see you better.

"You guys can see through walls?" Was all you could utter as you slowly turned your head to Jongler.

"Ahh, you heard dat... yes." They hung their head. "It's normal for us, so we don't talk 'bout it."

"So it knew I was in there?" Your voice was weak.

"From my understandin'... yes."

You inhaled slowly.

Rye moved to crouch beside you, petting your shoulder. "You're gonna be okay, buddy. There's four of us aware now. You're not gonna spend a second alone."

The thought didn't exactly soothe you. Sure, it was nice your friends wanted to protect you, but it meant for the next indeterminate amount of time - maybe even the rest of your life - you'd never be able to even wander down a hallway alone. You'd never have independence

again, always hiding from a robotic snake with arms that wanted you dead. Zappers were formidable, too. If it wanted you gone, it'd take it seconds to turn your body into nothing. You had no idea how this situation was going to be solved.

Maybe Battat was right. Maybe this could be investigated, handed over to Mike, and Mike and Tenna could do something about it. You felt so helpless. Now Rye and Battat and Pluey and Jongler were all involved in this mess that could've been avoided had you just stayed out of trouble. Pippinses were always causing trouble. Tears pricked at your eyes. You were just another shitty, worthless Pippins, causing issues and endangering others. Maybe Jongler and Pluey could "handle" this Zapper if things got confrontational, but even two Zappers fighting could result in the death of one... and Jongler wasn't exactly violent. Never before had you felt so weak and powerless. It was just your luck to consistently roll 1s and land yourself in something this terrible.

Maybe Tenna could do something? The rumours always had it that he didn't like Pippinses too much - but he was also a softie. He would surely intervene. The iron and steel giant hated the idea of his employees being injured - but would he just side with the Zapper? If they insisted you were a troublemaker? You were, technically. You were a shoplifter, a thief, a prankster, you used to drink and gamble and lapdance on Shadowguys at parties, you had a foul mouth and you broke every rule that seemed boring to you. You weren't exactly the beacon of innocence. Nobody outside these four will believe you.

You felt doomed.

You didn't realize you were crying until bodies were around you, murmuring reassurances, Battat's voice expressing concern, "you guys are gonna overwhelm them!"

It felt kind of like you were a dying dog, and everyone was saying their last goodbyes, telling you, "it's gonna be okay," before the vet comes in for the last time. You knew they meant well, but it really did feel like you were facing your doom and they desperately wanted to console you so it hurt less.

How did it come to this?

One by one, Jongler, Rye, Pluey pried themselves away from you.

Battat huffed. "Anyways, I made a ton of pasta. Penne rosa," he stormed back to the kitchen. "There's enough for everyone and extra."

You all gathered at the table. Jongler, you noticed, didn't eat. Oh god. What if Zappers really did eat in a way that was too scary for Pippinses to see. The conversation with Battat flashed in your mind and you smiled. You sat at the furthest edge of the table, Pluey beside you, Rye beside him. Battat pressed his shoulder against yours, and stood as he ate.

He was less... cuddly, than the others. But he was still trying to make it known he wanted to be supportive. Strangely, it was the loudest to you. It vibrated your eardums and chest, tingled your senses and sent waves of chills throughout you wherever he tried. His shoulder up against yours made you certain that he must feel every sensation racing through you - if he knew, he made no indication of it. Just remained pressed to you.

The food was divine, though - did he add sun dried tomatoes? The rich flavour made you whine in delight. Pluey seemed to be on the same page as you.

"You're a real good cook," Rye complimented.

"It's nothin'... I just like being helpful, I guess." Battat sounded strangely humble.

Rye was the first to say goodnight. He hugged you at the door.

"Please, stay safe," the bigger Pippins whispered. "You're the only family I got. I don't know what I'd do without you."

You nodded into his shoulder. "Trying my best."

"I'm glad Battat and his friends are taking care of you." Rye squeezed you, afraid of letting go. "I can rest easier."

"I didn't even know he had friends three weeks ago," you wheezed a small laugh. "But they're so nice..."

"Batt's got competition from that Pluey guy." He suddenly released you, and winked.

"Oh my GOD, shut up!!" You squawked in embarassment. No no no!!! "Batt said Pluey's just Italian-"

Rye laughed loudly. "Italians are the romantic-"

"Get ouuut!" You complained. "I'll see you...?? When?"

"Soon," Rye grinned. He leaned in for another quick hug. "You'll be alright. I'm glad you got good company."

"I do." You smiled. "Take care, Rye. Get home safe."

"I'm on the next floor down," he laughed. "Night, songbird."

Songbird. A name you hadn't heard him say in a long time. He called you that when you were still a babyfaced Pippins, new to TV world. He'd quickly become your best friend - family.

"G'night, Rye."

And he was gone, making his way down the hall. You closed the door behind him.

Battat, Pluey, and Jongler were still chatting when you came back.

"I think we should just tell 'em," Jongler reasoned. "It'd make things easier."

Pluey hummed in agreement.

"Fine... wait, NO-"

"Tell me what?" You intruded meekly.

"We are Mike," Jongler blurted, refusing to give Battat time to change his mind.

"Wh- no- ugh- wait, yes," Battat clawed his face in exasperation. "We aren't Mike, but we are."

That explained everything, suddenly. The massive hulking cowboy figure, the dancing, silent cat, and...

You burst out laughing.

"Oh no, we broke 'em,"

Battat groaned. "That's... not it..."

Pluey whistled in confusion.

"Sorry, sorry," you gasped. "It makes sense, I'm not that surprised,"

"You're not?!" Battat demanded. "What do you mean you're not that surprised?!"

"The shapeshifting?!" You still were laughing.

Jongler wobbled their head - infared blush filled what should be their cheeks. "I s'pose that gives us away."

"It explains why Batt shoved me in a closet, being able to get employee records, and, and-" you finally were regaining your breath. "And why he was so appalled when I..."

Battat was glaring daggers at you. You sputtered and clung to the table to not fall over.

"When I..."

"When yous...?"

"Said his lovehandles as Mike were cute,"

Pluey's laughter was louder than yours.

Jongler's face lit up even further, before they struggled to keep it cool. "Well, boss, they's right..."

"All of you go home!! Now!!!" Battat shrieked, his face was greener than a meadow.

When it came to goodbyes, Jongler leaned down with a gentle hug for you, and Pluey showered both your cheeks in kisses.

"Okay, that's enough, you scoundrels," Battat hissed. His grouchy exterior returned from embarassment. Pluey was unperturbed, and went to do it to him, too, only to be slapped. You tried not to laugh more.

"Get home safe, guys," your tone shifted gently to something more serious.

"We're the two who can defend ourselves the best," Jongler reassured. "No need worryin' bout us. Plues gots a gun and I'm. Well." They motioned at themself. "Me 'n' Plues are roomies. Both of yous take care, 'kay?"

You smiled up at the large, kindhearted Zapper.

"I'll do my best."

Battat hummed. "Our base is safe. Double locked 'n' all." He smirked at his companions. "You two take care, too."

Jongler wobbled approvingly, and then they left, Pluey in tow, blowing final kisses at you.

Battat double locked the door.

"Can't believe you weren't surprised at us being Mike," he muttered.

You laughed. "He's constantly changing shapes. It kinda makes sense if three different darkners were taking turns. Why do y'all do it, anyway? Isn't that kinda fucked up? Like, identity theft-"

"Nooo no no you're not accusin' me of crimes," Battat wagged a finger at you as you both made your way to the couch. "I did it initially, solo, because Tenna is like, always callin' for Mike. And Mike NEVER shows up. Not even once!"

You nodded as you listened.

"So, when Mike doesn't show up, what happens? Boss gets drunk, crying and yelling. I researched Mike and found... really nothing much," he huffed. "So I made the costume, in hopes it could placate him - and get more answers. It became too much for me to do alone, so Pluey and Jongler wanted to help. Which is CRAZY because anyone with eyes can at least maybe question the shapeshifting - but as long as someone named Mike is attending to Tenna, he doesn't care! He doesn't even notice! But of course." He adjusted his tie, smugly. "I'm the favourite."

You burst out giggling. "I think the cat's my favourite-"

"What?!?"

"I'm kidding! I'm kiddingg!! But it's good to know. I was getting suspicious," you chuckled.

"You were getting suspicious so you commented on my lovehandles," he sneered. Under the sneer, you could still see his cheeks threatening to turn evergreen again.

"They're CUTE,"

"They're FOAM."

You only wheezed in response.

"I'd never let anyone else come out alive knowing the truth, but. You're a special case." He huffed importantly. "You got a whole stalker. I think Jongler is right that we should've told you. In any other circumstances I'd say absolutely not."

You nodded, still struggling to compose yourself. "Of course. I'm glad I know."

"Maybe now I can do my duties again," he groaned. "I'll just leave you here with Jongler or Jongler and Pluey while I go be Motormouth..."

"Why do both options involve Jongler?"

"Because Pluey's- ugHHHHH. Shut up. Let's not talk about this anymore!"

You laughed again. "Okay okay, I'm gonna shower, but before I do, thank you."

"For what?" He seemed perplexed.

"You guys really cheered me up today." You smiled at him. Something in your expression made him avert his gaze. "It was sweet. And fun. Thank you. I feel a lot better when I'm with... y'all." You hurried to the bathroom.

Pomegrante soap kept you tethered to sanity, truly.

When you left the shower, Battat's room door was closed. He must be changing for bed, you thought.

But something caught your eye. Folded purple fabric on the corner of the couch closest to your room. You ran to it, and took it back to your room.

Finally!!! He returned it!!! Finally!!!

You pressed your face into the plush purple fabric, before your face, neck, and slowly: the rest of you heated up. It smelled like him. Men's cologne, and an unidentifiable smell - pleasant, to say the least. Dear god. It smelled like him and it smelled nice and you were rubbing your face all over it like some kind of cat.

Your stomach dropped a little as you realized all those weird feelings around him was a crush. You had a crush on Battat. Your heart thundered wildly at the realization.

Battat would never give you the time of day. He was friendlier now, and that was a huge step in the right direction. But he still could be aloof, still preferred to dig himself into whatever rabbit holes could feed his brain online, still didn't seem very interested in you as a person - he was friendlier and nicer to you because you were in forced proximity. Getting along was more beneficial than being at each other's throats. But sincerity sometimes showed its face to

you, weakening your insides to just a puddle of fluttering feelings. You weren't sure why he had this affect on you, or when it started. But a silly crush couldn't hurt.

You slept soundly that night - blanket pressed to your face, wrapped in your arms. You forgot to fully close the door, but it didn't matter.

You slept better than you had in weeks, dreams of snowy nights, the soothing scent of pine and coffee-addicted coworkers, and embraces that kept you warm.

Chapter 9: Visions

Chapter Summary

> I got to try Vietnamese food today. It was very delicious! I tried the "HA NOI style grilled pork with vermicelli". Incredible first impressions, really. Chapter notes seem a bit broken on mobile (showing up on the wrong chapters), so forgive my commentary here in the summary. I am a happy author today.
>
> Thank you for your continued comments!! I read every one, giggling and kicking my feet, even if I can't respond immediately.

The small flashlight clipped to your breast pocket was your only means of visibility.

Dust particles fell like snowfall in front of you. Broken pipes hung from the ceiling, bits of decaying plaster and drywall sank loosely around you, threatening to fall if you moved too hastily. Distant dripping sounds and the faint, metallic thumps from pipes still struggling to breathe was all that could be heard alongside your shoes as they tapped on cold wooden floors as you walked through the darkness. Everything around you was decayed, rotten, falling apart. Darkness threatened to envelop everything: cold, unseeing, unfeeling. It was smothering.

You could hear your heartbeat, but you couldn't feel it. You could feel everything but your heartbeat.

You weren't quite sure where you were. The decay was too much for you to discern your surroundings very well. Your shotgun weighed heavy in your arms as you treaded through the darkness.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Your footsteps became softer, wetter. When you looked down, water was forming around you - where it came from, how it got in, was unclear to you. All you could do was keep going.

Your dark coat was tattered, filthy. It wasn't the usual ponchos you wore.

Cold wrapped around your ankles and you gasped softly. The water was rising without any sound. The floor beneath you groaned under the weight of the water. You kept treading onward, despite your growing fear. It felt like you'd been walking for hours.

The cold lapped against your legs, soaking your pants - you shivered a little at the sensation. The sound of water swashing around you joined the quiet array of sounds filling your ears. It was all so quiet, yet so loud.

Still, you carried on. This place seemed to go on forever. The further you went, the more rotten it became. The hanging, broken pipes were rusted, formerly green wallpaper peeling and discoloured. Some walls were completely caved in, revealing flooded rooms with knocked over furniture. The only thing you could even pretend you recognized was the wallpaper, really. Ripped posters, vandalized bulletin boards, soaking wet towers of boxes... was this an abandoned basement? A loose guess. The water licked at your upper thighs, the sensation deeply uncomfortable. Cold. Your body was feeling heavy. The water began to weigh at your clothes.

A groan from up ahead finally raised sounded the sirens in your mind. You lifted your shotgun, rooting yourself in place, ready to fire.

The water steadily rose.

You didn't want to fight. You didn't want to hold a firearm. You didn't even want to be here. Your vision was worse than it usually was.

You heard your heart but you didn't feel it.

The water crawled up your waist. You felt sluggish and tired.

The shotgun in your arms stayed steady and true, pointed forward even as you began feeling lethargic from the ice cold water. The electronic sounds of a zapper began filling your ears as the water began to lap at your abdomen. In the back of your mind, you wondered if your flashlight would still work in the water. Probably not well.

Blue and red came into view.

You fired as lightning flew towards you, sending you falling back into the water, sinking. You tried to scream as water rushed into your mouth, your throat, your lungs, bubbles of air escaping you as you sank in the murky water. Your chest heaved, the primal scream finally ripping out of you.

You jolted awake, panting wildly.

"Jeez- are you okay?! Nightmare?" Battat's panicked voice came closer to you.

You were on the couch - you'd taken a midday nap while at home with your roommate as he worked quietly away on his laptop at the kitchen table. It was another lazy Sunday spent indoors. You didn't even realize when you'd fallen asleep - you'd gotten up earlier, had breakfast, hung out with him for a while before you'd floated to the couch to play on your handheld console for a couple hours before dozing off. And here you were now, in a cold sweat from a bad dream.

"Yeah," you gasped. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry? Wanna talk about it?" He rested his elbows on the backrest of the couch and looked down at you. "You screamed and it freaked me right out."

"I was in some sort of basement, drowning. It was really dark. Something else was with me..." You hugged yourself as you looked up at him. "Sometimes I get dreams where I'm being followed. It's never usually this vivid." You breathed.

He hummed wordlessly for a moment before he spoke again. "Wanna take your mind off it?"

"... sure, what you thinkin'?"

"I feel like we game too much," he chuckled. "Movies? Starting a show?"

"Anything that doesn't require too much brainpower..." you mumbled peacefully. "I did just wake up, yanno."

His evergreen eyes met yours, causing your heart to flutter. It was so embarassing how easily this was beginning to comfort you.

He exhaled a soft little laugh. "Right."

He turned on the television, and flipped through channels for a while. He settled on a marathon of a sitcom style cartoon.

He moved his laptop over to the couch - comfortably settling himself down in the corner with his legs crossed.

A few episodes in, you wanted to just... talk.

"So you guys are Mike."

"You heard it right."

"I know I said I wasn't surprised, but it is kinda crazy-"

"Well-"

"No, like, your Mike persona is kind of a jerk to us Pippins, but he's far more..."

"Expressive," Battat filled in for you.

"Yeah. That. Him being secretly a Pippins makes sense for his size, but I guess I just didn't expect you specifically."

"I try to not make it obvious." He huffed, eyes on the laptop. "If I have to ham up being an asshole so nobody thinks I'm Motormouth Mike, so be it. I'm Tenna's favourite of the three. It's been... weird not doing my usual Mike duties as much. I've given Plues and Jong notes on what I usually do and how I usually behave as Mike, but... it was mostly me doing double

shifts all the time, switching in and out of costume in the "Mike Room", anything at Tenna's beck and call. Two totally different identities so I don't get found out."

"Sheesh. Sounds like a lotta work..."

"Is it ever!" He groaned in exasperation. "On one hand, I'm stressed about it, but on the other hand it's kinda nice kickin' back and getting to be..." he rolled his wrist. "Lazier?"

"Mm. Right. And you guys do this to keep Tenna stable?"

"Yeah," he pursed his lips at the screen. "He's a real good guy, just... abandonment issues out the ass. I'm sure you've seen how he gets. Between the mail guy and the Lightners, Ten's kinda..."

"Emotional," you supplied.

"Something like that."

"Are we... would he believe us if we..."

"I'd want to give him sufficient evidence," he frowned. "And a name. I can't go in as Mike and tell him to background check every Zapper. There's only twelve, thankfully, but that's still a lot... and ideally we want your stalker straight up banished. I want my information exact."

"Do you have any leads?"

"Well, that's the problem." Battat peered up at you. "We know Jongler, and that one female Zapper, Electra, are not the guy. Jongler's been listening in on Zapper conversations and they generally just don't comment too much on Pippinses to give any real leads. They're hardly chatty in the first place. Which makes singling out who did it harder..."

"And the security footage?"

Battat's expression grew grim. "It's gone."

"Gone? Just- like, deleted?"

"Yes. The footage from that day is gone. I've never seen it, even. There's just an awkward cut in the footage. Possible the Zapper did it."

"Do Zappers even have access to security footage?"

"They ARE security." Battat reminded you. "Of course they do. They can also just... straight up pause recordings."

Your heart sank.

"And they all look similar," he continued. "We can distinguish Jongler from the rest with their bandana and gentle demeanour, the female Zapper because she lets her girlfriend hang around

her all day, despite not really being supposed to. And her voice is a bit softer. But the rest are pretty rigid with the uniform and rules, they don't talk enough on Pippinses to single out who, and the footage we do have doesn't lead anywhere. We'll have to get more obsessive- or, well, I will. I don't care if I never sleep again." He shot you a crooked grin. "I'll go bonkers, but I'll hunt this guy down til my last breath."

Only then did you take in how tired his eyes were.

"You've been losing sleep..?!"

"It's nothing, really," he tried to assure. "I don't like resting until I have answers."

"No, no, please, you should rest." You frowned deeply. "It's my fault..."

"You didn't ask to be stalked." He pointed out.

"I didn't, but I also don't want you losing sleep over me."

"Well I want to."

Your eyes shot back up to meet his, a determined glint in his eye sent butterflies... or more likely, fireworks off in your chest. At least realizing you had a crush on him better explained why you felt this way. But in a sense, that made it worse. Your crush, a conspiracy obsessed, at-home investigator, losing sleep - when he should be relaxing on a weekend - over a case you weren't even sure could be resolved... And it was, entirely, your fault. You wished you could've been in better circumstances to explore your feelings.

"What do we even do?"

"Maybe we can get Pluey to arm ya." He commented.

"Arm me...?"

"Yeah. Like, a gun."

"Oh. Cool. Real normal stuff here."

"Don't pretend it wouldn't reassure you to at least leave a mark on the Zapper?"

"True... if I make it out alive."

"And you will!" Battat leaned forward with a wicked grin. "Because you got THREE of Tenna's best guys with ya at all times!... or at least, one of three at all times."

"Are you... armed?" You asked cautiously.

"Not unless I'm worried." Battat leaned back, face relaxing. "It's not something I particularly like."

"Me neither."

"Yeah but after the closet incident, I'm not taking chances. I'd sleep better if I knew you could even sorta defend yourself."

You gave small mhmm.

"I doubt it was the S-rank room Zapper." Battat started. "He lets Pippins in and out of that room all the time anyway, which is against the rules."

"Ahh.."

"I'll start bringing my camera everywhere we go, too..." Battat rubbed his chin in thought. "Maybe we can catch a glimpse of them."

You nodded.

"Also," Battat looked back up at you. "We should get groceries again. We're low on dinner supplies."

You nodded again. "When can we go?"

"Whenever you want."

"Let's get dressed and go, then. Fresh air couldn't hurt."

You dressed in your usual, black hood resting on your head, and Battat wore something similar - he fished for a hooded poncho today, too. Yours was all black while his still had his trademark green. He looked cute. Grocery shopping without Pluey and Jongler felt a bit more mundane, but Battat carried a relaxed demeanour by himself. Something about mundane tasks with Battat felt surreal, yet you didn't mind the idea of being like this forever with him. You followed him loyally and only occasionally picked out your own stuff - he was determined to plan out the next week's dinners, so you wanted to return the favour by planning out your lunches. Sandwiches, stir fry, whatever you could reasonably make and pack for the both of you. It was only fair.

"I wanted to get some more iron in our meals." Battat mumbled.

He knew, there's no way he didn't. That you were severely anemic. No wonder you'd felt generally a bit better recently - he'd been paying attention.

"Sounds good... thank you." Was all you could awkwardly utter.

"No problem."

You never elaborated to him, did you? It was just something he picked up. Seeing you pop three bottles all the time probably raised some questions. A week ago, you'd have been displeased at him knowing. But now you didn't mind as much. Especially knowing he was secretly... or, not very secretly... looking out for you. The idea flustered you. He'd make a

good... no, no. You couldn't think about that. Not in the grocery store. Maybe later when you could hide your face alone in your room.

You snapped your attention back to him as he perused vegetables, carefully picking them out by what he considered to be fresh. Honestly, years of vaguely knowing him, and you'd never guessed he was like this. You expected a cold shut-in (half correct), who probably neglected himself more. You even thought he was a smoker until you saw him with perscription inhalers not too long ago - connecting the dots he was actually just asthmatic. Sickly, like you. So many little things you were uncovering while being in forced proximity to him. You wondered if he began caring for himself before or after having to work overtime in a costume. He moved with thoughtful precision as he browsed. Ugh. Your heart twinged. It felt inappropriate crushing on him during one of the more traumatic times of your life. How nice it would've been to be normal and charm him in your own way, on your own, without being forced to constantly shadow each other. You wanted more but it felt inappropriate to want more - forbidden. He was also in charge of you, obligated to keep you in his line of sight at all times. Nothing about your closeness was normal or natural. Maybe the crush was some kinda coping method, but fighting off the thoughts was harder than it sounded. All you could do was stupidly yearn for him as you watched him scanning items to put in the cart.

Battat, without being dragged up and down every aisle, was a very efficient shopper, at least. He carried a list of exactly everything he wanted, making it a clear and quick mission. So you weren't uselessly standing around for too long staring at him. You averted your gaze in hopes he wasn't feeling the intensity of your gaze in the back of his neck.

Something abruptly sent chills up your spine.

You looked over your shoulder, desperately trying to see what was causing that feeling.

The head of a zapper disappeared into another aisle.

Unthinkingly, you bolted from Battat and ran towards the Zapper. You had to know. This couldn't be a delusion, right? You weren't be paranoid for no reason. You pursued them; ignoring Battat's calls behind you. That Zapper was here.

You skidded around the corner, and... they were gone. No trace of a Zapper. Not even its head bobbing away. Nothing. You stood there, panting, as Battat angrily rolled up the cart behind you.

"Hey, dumbass, what was that about?!" He gently bumped you with the cart.

You turned to him sheepishly. "Sorry. I just... I thought I saw something."

"The Zapper?" He tilted his head.

"Yeah... but no one's here." You frowned toward the aisle.

He looked over, following your gaze. "That's... creepy. Let's check out and go home. You're holding the cart with me, now, though. No running off."

"Okay, mom," you lazily teased as he grabbed your hand and placed it on the cart handle beside his. The contact secretly thrilled you.

You only felt safe when you were finally home, behind locked doors. You wondered if things would be like this forever - if this elusive Zapper intended to play with its food forever, or if it planned to isolate you. If it planned to catch you off guard. Maybe you would have to endure this taunting forever. You frowned at the thought. Maybe if you confronted it, you could see what it wants. Maybe that could make a difference. Did you really want to spend the rest of your troubled life under supervision, with no freedom, no autonomy, no privacy? Of course you enjoyed being around Battat - but you wanted to enjoy time with him on your own terms.

This whole situation was proposed as a punishment, but now it served as a protective cage. The thought made you shudder. If you were still living alone, you could disappear so easily, and only Rye would've noticed. Anyone could've taken your place and nobody would've noticed. You were replacable. You were not someone worth finding. You would've just been a small missing poster on a bulletin board everyone would've forgotten about by Christmas. It hurt to think about. How would you even get out of this?

Battat had wanted to arm you - the thought scared you a little, but you understood the importance. Your nightmare was an indicator of that. As a Pippins, you were smaller and weaker compared to the other Darkners here. A Zapper could kill you in an instant - any longer would be deliberate torture. A Shadowguy could take you out easily. Only somewhat closer in size, you'd maybe leave some scratches if you tore off your gloves in time. A Shuttah could rip you apart if they so desired. The Weather Duo were... fortunately, harmless, but their temperature-based attacks would easily send a Pippins into shock, causing either hypothermia or heat stroke. You didn't want to know which would happen first. Even the Ribbicks, while small and usually in the garbages, could emit toxic gasses and suffocate you while standing. Pippinses could kill each other, but it felt closer to how lightners could murder each other. You didn't really have any Pippins enemies to worry about - they let go of grudges easily, maybe talked shit at worst. Because you all had one thing in common: you were the most picked on type of Darkner in TV world. You had to look out for each other, ultimately. There was many of you, and while you all tried to differentiate yourselves, it only really made meaningful impact amongst yourselves. The other darkners all still saw you as red die. Except Battat - but he was seen more with Pluey and Jongler, earning him a bit of a reputation for being "one of the good ones".

How this particular Zapper could distinguish you among the rest disturbed you. It knew you. But you didn't know any Zappers personally, aside from Jongler now. Did this one just have a particular grudge?

A gun would easily, at least, leave a mark on the Zapper. Even if it was suicide, you'd be marking him for the others. You shuddered.

A knock broke your trance. Musical trills from the other side.

Battat, just having finished putting the groceries away, went to answer the door.

"Pluey! Jong! Come on in. We need you."

A shotgun, and a pistol were presented to you.

You picked the pistol for easy carrying. It was made of shadows, you noted. They all were. But they were real. Solid and heavy.

Your hands felt so small in comparison. Even against the black fabric of your gloves, the pistol alone looked large.

"I'll store the other one in my room, then," Battat hummed. "I don't really like that we gotta keep these on hand, but... thanks, Plues. You're a lifesaver, forreal."

Pluey purred in response.

Battat turned a sober gaze to you. "If it ever comes here, you're free to grab this from my closet." He held the shotgun up with one hand before bringing it to his room. When he came out, he immediately went to murmur something to Pluey.

"You's okay?" Jongler's gentle hand landed on your shoulder. "You's looked... pale since we came in, but I see heat in you. Never good signs." They whirred softly.

"I saw something today," you whispered. "At the store. With Batt."

They leaned in.

"I felt something... wrong, and when I looked, a Zapper was walking around the corner. When I chased after them, they were gone. Zappers can't teleport, can they?" You breathed, finally looking up to the thin white line where you assumed Jongler was seeing you out of.

"They can." They confirmed somberly. "We all can. I can teleports outta here if I wanted."

"So whoever it is..."

"Theys messin' with ya."

You swallowed.

"You'd be safest with us." They murmured. "I knew from day one it was an accident."

Your eyes widened. "Right... you were Mike that day."

"Mhmm." They nodded. "Boss switched us out in case big boss might want me to deliver a bruisin', but I didn't really wanna." Infared coloured their cheeks. "I don't like hurtin' Pippinses. You looked scared 'nuff anyways. But big boss is a softie. He saw yous lookin' scared and decided to letcha off easy."

"I never really elaborated what happened, did I...?" You asked softly.

"You don't haf'ta." Jongler assured. "I've seen 'nuff to trust yous either way." They wrapped their arm gently around your shoulders, their voice still a soft hum too quiet for the other two to hear. "I did my time takin' care of Pippinses. Bailin' 'em out, carrying 'em to ERs when they's havin' asthma attacks..." they looked at Battat as they spoke - the green Pippins engrossed in some kinda strategy talk with Pluey. "Grosses me out when otha Zappa's wanna hurt yous."

You looked up at them almost mournfully. "You're a real good friend, y'know? Anyone would be lucky to have you around."

They blushed - infared colouring their face a bit more fully at the compliment. "Aw shucks. Nobody tells me dat. Thanks. Just know yous is safe with us."

Battat's voice cut in. "RIGHT." He looked pleased at something Pluey told him. "I can put together all our evidence... I'll need another board, I'm sick of using spreadsheets! Tenna will HAVE to believe us!"

You snorted a small laugh.

That night, he made rotini pasta with a rich tomato sauce and chopped up meatballs. It was so good, you wanted to cry. Jongler and Pluey stayed for dinner - Jongler sat and chatted, while Pluey and Battat sat at both sides of you. You ignored your heart racing as Battat pressed his shoulder to yours again. You wanted that moment to last forever. You wanted a lot of these little peaceful moments to last forever, really.

The usual goodbyes - a gentle hug from Jongler, double cheek kisses and a big hug from Pluey, Battat's flushed expression as he shooed them out. You showered at night this time.

You kept your new pistol under your bed. The safety, at least, was visible on the shadowy gun. You kept it on and hoped you wouldn't need it.

You crawled into bed and pressed your blanket close to your face - the smell of Battat's body still infused with the pastel purple fabric. You'd never admit how much it comforted you.

Chapter 10: If I lay here

The week went by mostly uneventfully.

Monday.

You and Battat worked in the control room. You caught him sneakily looking at employee schedules. Of course, you said nothing. You sat together with Rye at lunch. You forgot your medicine that day - so you'd struggled getting out of bed. After work, you'd collapsed on the couch. He woke you up for dinner, and near immediately after you were crashed on the couch again. You'd woken up with him laying adjacent to you there, too, like he didn't want to leave you alone. It comforted you.

Tuesday.

You worked the morning in editing, and moved onto cleaning in the evening. The cafeteria served a pasta that didn't bother you, but Battat complained of nausea after. He was shocked to learn you carried anti nausea medicine. You joked about having a weak stomach. You made a hearty, but simple soup for him that night. He seemed grateful that you went of your way to make something just so he could feel better. "Let me take care of you sometimes," you'd told him. The smile he gave you made you weak in the knees.

Wednesday.

You felt drowsy and weak again. You forgot your medicine again. Was your mind slipping? The cafeteria's pizza for lunch was extra good that day, at least. Battat angrily huffed at you during work - causing you to shrink a little. He assured you later it wasn't your fault, and apologized. He looked tired. He let Jongler watch you while he ran off to do Mike duties. You watched from the sound booth how much happier Tenna seemed as a costumed Battat hopped at his every beck and call. You knew the suit was stuffy - poor Battat was wheezing and struggling to breathe when he came back. His asthma must've been bad that day. That night you made dinner - nothing terribly special, just tacos, but he was delighted. His smile made you warm inside. Nightmares tugged at you anyway.

Thursday.

Battat was feeling better. You weren't doing as hot. You'd felt somewhat feverish. He asked if you wanted to stay home, but you assured him you'd be fine working. You stayed in the bathroom a bit too long as he stood guard. Lunch with him and Rye kept you steady. You finally teased Battat about the jar of pickles he'd bring to lunch. With a groan, he told you he did it out of laziness that day. But he did enjoy eating them like that. You smiled so much

your cheeks hurt, despite how otherwise awful you'd felt. Rye teased you when Battat went to the washroom. When he returned, you both went to cleaning the dressing rooms. Elnina giggled at the sight of you holding onto Battat's poncho - not knowing it was because you were sick, not because you were clingy. You couldn't tell if it was the fever or blush making your neck hot. Your sickness did, in fact, make you at least a little clingy.

Of course, something would happen on a Friday.

You'd remained feverish - you'd already taken medicine, and it wasn't really working. But you didn't really wanna skip out on work, either. You were beginning to enjoy being productive and "good" at work. Your good behaviour was beginning to consistently earn small praises from Battat. Of course, you wanted to soak in anything he gave you. Even if you were sick doing it.

"You really should be resting." He frowned slightly at you.

"I'm fine, really." You spoke quietly.

It wasn't fine at all. Your body ached, you had cold sweats, your throat tickled uncomfortably. You were shaking. You should've been in bed. But you were getting hooked on his attention - so staying at his side at work and earning bits of praise was far more ideal than sleeping the day away. At least in your mind.

He didn't believe you. "Well, if I'm sick all weekend, I'm blaming you."

"Maybe we can be sick all week instead."

"Hah!" He huffed a laugh. "Good one."

You smiled weakly.

"Y'know..." he tapped his gloved claws on the table you both sat at. "I like that we've become friends."

Your eyes widened as he went on.

"I like getting to... finally get along with you." He shot you a crooked smile. "I don't have much Pippins friends."

"Why not?"

"I like the others," he stammered quickly, "but I don't really... have as much common ground with them. Like. I'm a bad gambler. I drink but I'd rather not be drunk around them... I can't smoke and I'm a wallflower at parties."

Green flushed his cheeks.

"I'm an outsider."

You used to be part of the crowd, you thought, but in the last few weeks everything turned upside down.

"I am too, now, I guess. So we can be outsiders together." You met him with a soft smile.

"A-anyways, do you want a coffee?" He stammered. "I need some fresh air and Jongler's just down there," he pointed to the large window in front of you both. The audio booth was behind the audience on an upper level - just climbing up behind the audience lead you to the stairs to audio, where you were both seated.

Tenna still was pretty massive even from all the way up here, and Jongler, as "Mike", could be seen with their arms crossed just off stage, sitting in wait. "You should be fine here for five minutes, right?"

"Yeah. I mean, Jong and Tenna are right there," you murmured. "I think I'll survive." You shot him a teasing glance.

He made a small sound imitating you before he was gone. You made a tiny laugh before you turned back around. It was a slower day, still, and it wasn't like you were doing too much. You were relieved he offered to grab it - you didn't feel up to walking too much. You adjusted your headset and sat patiently.

You didn't care to look when the door opened, but you did notice Jongler's demeanour downstairs change. They slowly turned, arms dropping to their sides. It felt like they moved in slow motion.

A large hand sat on your shoulder.

Pressure.

So much pressure.

Massive metal hands pressing into you with such force it was threatening to snap you.

You gasped at the sudden pain- then heat. A tingling burning heat that stunned you into losing your track of thought. Your heart stopped for a moment from the electric wave that blasted through you.

You barely registered Jongler making a dash for the stairs as you fell from your chair, grasping your shoulder and gasping for air, chest heaving.

The Zapper was gone by the time your Zapper burst through the door.

You were curled up in pain.

"Card'nal," Jongler's frantic voice pierced through your ringing ears. "Talk to me!"

All you could do was wheeze.

Battat's voice quickly followed. "What happened?!"

"They're-"

"Did they get sick? What happened?!"

"The Zappa-"

"WHAT?!"

Now the two of them were on you - Battat drilling you and Jongler with questions, Jongler frantically trying to answer between horrified "I don't know"s, trying to cradle your limp but still conscious body.

"Uh, Mike?"

"Shitshitshit, Tenna's here, what do we say-"

"I don't knooooow,"

"Mike, is everything okay in there?"

"Okay just say they're sick just say they're sick," a frantic hiss from Battat.

"Uh, yeah, boss, everything's okay,"

The door opened, and Tenna squeezed in, shrinking himself to size. This was a goddamn disaster. The room was still spinning for you - the fresh electrocution leaving your heartbeat erratic and your thoughts disoriented. Your shoulder was burning.

"It doesn't sound like it? Oh my goodness, Pippins, are you alright?!" His voice quickly turned into concern.

"Medical episode," you finally squeezed out words.

"Oh!" The CRT frowned. "We should call for an Ambyu-Lance... let's get you outta here."

At least that went smoothly enough - but what wasn't smooth was Tenna coming with you all to the ER. You still struggled to get words out between difficult breathing, so you let Battat use his best improv skills. You were scared of Tenna knowing the full scope and worse: possibly not believing you.

"They have the flu," Battat began. "And heart issues. So they're... it's a heart attack," Battat concluded.

Ohhhh God.

"A heart attack?!" Tenna gasped.

"Yes. And you don't have a heart, because you're a robot, so you don't really get it, huh?" Battat said firmly. "They'll be hooking Cardinal here up to some real... personal tests. Ones

their boss can't be present for." He wagged his finger at Tenna knowingly. "Only their bestests can be there."

Jongler said nothing as they held your hand in their oversized gloves. The contact helped you feel at ease in the back of the ambulance headed to Cyber City. This was a bit too large of a deal for the small clinic outside TV World.

"Oh, will you be with them-?"

"Of course. It was you who wanted me to watch over them. I fully intend to see to their health."

"Oh! You are so devoted!" A flower sprung from Tenna's nose. "They must trust you so much-!"

You tried not to groan. It was kind of entertaining in an embarassing way.

Battat stammered. "Well- uh- yes- of cours- wh- ye-" he settled on adjusting his tie as he thought of something to say. "I am the best guy for the job. Of course."

You turned your head to Jongler and prayed you wouldn't laugh. They leaned in sympathetically towards you.

"Are you hurt?" They asked gently.

"A little," your voice was a soft rasp. "I'm sure it's nothin."

The Ambyu-Lance was quick and thorough - Battat, indeed, kicked out Tenna and "Mike" as you got examined. A electrocardiograph and a physical examination. You didn't really want Battat to see what happened to you - you didn't even want to see the wound left on you. The Ambyu-Lance sharply inhaled when he took in the sight after you'd removed your shirt. If a die could get any paler, Battat would be white as snow as his eyes grazed the dark red print. Smoke was still coming off it in thin wisps.

The burn mark in the shape of a hand, wrapped around your shoulder. The Zapper got you good.

He cast a quick but strong healing spell on you - pain management, he'd said, and it'd restore your heartrate back to normal. You'd be on antibiotics for a week to prevent infection from the burn. Just a topical ointment. The Ambyu-Lance probably noticed your fever, too - it wasn't fully gone, but your tremors and cold sweats were instantly silenced.

Battat asked the doctor not to share any details with the others. With a head tilt, the Ambyu-Lance agreed. It didn't matter as long as your emergency contact - Battat - was aware.

Battat was silent the whole taxi drive home. Tenna in the front talking to Mike, sitting behind the driver. Battat in the middle, arm linked with yours, tightly holding your hand as you stared out the window. If you looked, your expression would give away that you enjoyed the

hand holding, even though from him, it was likely him silently trying to comfort you... and probably himself.

When you and Battat were finally home alone, you drifted off to your room. You'd shower tomorrow.

Today sucked, you wanted and desperately needed sleep. You were sick before everything went bad - now you felt like a train hit you.

As you got comfortable in the darkness, a gentle knock sounded at your door.

It was nearly inaudible. You strained your ears to listen again.

Another knock, only a little more confident.

"Batt? Come in?"

The door creaked open. Battat's silhouette stood awkwardly.

"Sorry if you were asleep-"

"No, no, it's fine. What's up?" You leaned up onto your elbows.

"Can I uh... come sit with you?" His face was hidden by the darkness, but his body language told you everything - shoulders tight, fidgeting, nervous.

"Sure." You scooted over.

The light from the main room illuminated your bed just a little, just enough that he could see and come sit beside you.

"I'm... I'm sorry about today."

He stared down at the floor.

"It's fine, Batt, it wasn't your-"

"Let me talk," he interrupted. "S-sorry, that was rude. I just." He sharply inhaled, and slowly exhauled. "I need to get this off my chest."

He waited until you nodded.

"I was shitty to you. Forever. Long before this stuff happened. And now I'm getting to know you and you're really not the shithead I thought you'd be. I don't know why I didn't realize that sooner. All you've ever done was try to be good to me." His voice wobbled. "I didn't realize... you were so scared. I thought you were just upset you got in trouble. Then I began putting the pieces together. You're sickly. You're pretty harmless. You're... petrified of Zappers," he breathed. "The hallway incident... that... that was that Zapper, wasn't it?"

You laid in silence staring at him before you only breathed one word.

"Yes."

"And I didn't even begin figuring it out until the closet incident. It was so much more serious than I'd thought..." his claws dug into your blankets as he stared off into the rest of your darkened room. "I wish I picked up on it sooner. I was too caught up in my own frustration. The Mike stuff's real important to me, it's the only way I feel useful, important, and I failed to see what was also important."

He looked back down at you.

"I failed you the day I left you in the closet and I failed you today. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He turned away.

"Don't apologize," you grabbed his arm. "I'm here and fine and I don't think you failed me."

"I shouldn't even have thought about leaving you," the green Pippins choked. "I thought, surely, Jong and Tenna are right there, nothing would happen, and it did. It did. It very much did. Now your shoulder looks like you got mauled by a flamethrower."

You winced at the description.

"You're like... blaming yourself so much," you commented. "Stop."

"I can't help it," he hissed. "Look at your shoulder. You'd have been fine if I stayed in the goddamn room-"

"I was fine with letting you go," you kept your voice lower. "Promise. I was equally complicit in whatever blame you're holding over yourself. How about that?"

He was probably white-knuckling your sheets enough that you'd secretly began to worry his claws might break through his gloves. You settled on a different form of calming him - a shot in the dark, but a shot nonetheless. You tugged him onto the bed beside you.

"Wh- what are you doing?!" He sputtered. "This isn't-"

"Just shut up," you proposed. "Close your eyes and breathe. I'm here right now, beside you, and fine. Just... shut up for a bit."

To your surprise, he listened.

Battat went still beside you. You both stared up at the ceiling, the dim lights from the main room being the only illumination. His breath was shaky, as if he were struggling. Yours was low and smooth. The healing spell earlier did wonders for you.

"What happened that day?" He finally breathed.

"The day this all started?" You turned to look at him.

"Yeah."

"No one told you?"

"Jong said you'd tell me when you were ready. And Plues said I should just come to you."

"Hah."

"Yeah."

"I'd have told you at anytime if you'd asked."

"Y-yeah, well. I'm asking now."

You laughed softly before you got serious.

"It was after lunch, I think... I went on a little walk and got lost in that TV hallway. I heard a Zapper and I guess I just... I got scared. I didn't wanna be chased." Tears stung your eyes. It was weeks ago now, and the fear still felt fresh. "So I just... I ran. And it got faster. Of course it did. A Pippins running away... ahaha, who wouldn't assume the worst?" You shuddered. "I ended up tripping. I grabbed one of those stupid fucking Tenna statues assuming they were rooted to the ground... but no. I... I slipped. My body slid into one of the televisions. And they... they all just. They all. They crashed. They all came down..."

Your chest was heaving as you tried to put it into words - Battat's arm gently came down onto you, holding you steady.

"You're safe now," he whispered. "There's nothing here that can... hurt you any more." He winced, the both of you knew the threat was still active outside of this small sanctuary you called your shared home. "At least not in here."

Battat held you in an awkward half hug as you both struggled to console yourselves.

"I'm just happy we're... probably close." You finally managed. You looked at him beside you.

He smiled weakly. "Closer than you know."

He suddenly pulled back before you grabbed his arm again. "Nuh uh," you tried to joke. "I'm not fully better. You should stay here till I'm 100%. That could be days."

He shook his head and laughed. "Okay, fine. I won't budge. Not even for weeks if you asked."

You had to look away and pray he couldn't feel your heart under his gloved hand.

"Shouldn't say things like that to your probationer."

"Pff. Yeah. Right after you tell me not to move."

"I guess that's true."

"This probably isn't how I should be doing my job," he sighed. "But I think I'm fine with that."

You wanted so badly to scoot closer to him, filling the awkward gap between you both, just to cuddle him. The restraint took all your willpower. You didn't even want to suggest it - despite the feeling that, if you did ask, he'd oblige.

"I don't know how we're gonna put an end to this," he whispered. "But we'll find a way. If it's the last thing I do."

"You'll like, never sleep again if that's true, dude."

"I'm fine with that."

"Then, just, tonight, here, I want you to just... rest, okay? Just lay here, and rest. Forget everything else."

His body relaxed - you could feel his weight shift.

"I can try."

"That's all I ask." You dared not to look at his face.

It didn't take long for you to both fall asleep - the turbulence of the day hitting you both in a strong wave of shared fatigue.

You awoke at some point - his gentle snoring right beside you. You tried to move, just a little, only for him to take you off guard. He wrapped around you. Heart pounding wildly, you took advantage of his sudden cuddles, snuggling in closer. He adjusted to hold you tighter, his body pressing against yours.

It hurt your shoulder and you squeaked ever so slightly in pain. Damn it.

"Sorry," he mumbled, and loosened his iron hold.

Was he awake?! Your eyes shot open.

... Followed up by another snore. Oh god. He reacted to you in his sleep.

Cuddles for Pippinses were less awkward than expected, even with dice shaped heads. He clung to you as if, even in his own dreams, he was afraid of what would happen if he dared let go again.

You were content being his teddy bear for the night. One day, you hoped, it could be every night. The comforting thought lulled you back to sleep.

Chapter 11: Burn wounds

Chapter Summary

> Both times I sat down to work on this chapter, I was very tired. Sorry if anything seems weirdly written or typos! Even as I wrap this up, I'm really tired. Kis kis kis to the 5 people still keeping up!

When you woke, you were still enveloped in the scent of pine and intoxicating cologne. Warmth wrapped around you. You weren't sure when - or if it was even your doing - blankets got gently draped over the two of you.

But he was still here.

Battat's arms were still wrapped around you - gloves much looser, and his poncho was gone. Maybe he threw it off at some point. But here he was, holding you tightly. Spooning you. It was heavenly.

You wanted so badly to turn and face him and cuddle into his chest, but it was your right shoulder that was covered in a massive second-degree burn. You'd have to turn to your right side to face him... Maybe irritating a fresh burn wasn't the move, so you wiggled closer to him, backing up against him, and he tightened his arms around you in response. Curiously, his hips pressed and gently grinded against you. His breathing was still long, soft, with occasional snorts. He was definitely asleep, given his waking self was not as big on physical contact. It took weeks, and your life being endangered for him to even begin getting close to you.

"I love you," you whispered.

You knew he wasn't awake to hear it. You knew. But a small part of you hoped that, in his dreams, maybe he will hear it.

You checked the time - past five in the morning. You browsed your social medias on low brightness absentmindedly for while, before he finally stirred behind you.

He only incoherently mumbled before letting out a long sigh, and nuzzled into the back of your head with his. It sent butterflies and fireworks throughout your chest - his sleepy affection made you feel fuzzy inside, the trauma of yesterday feeling so gone, so distant. At least for now. You felt a small pang in your chest - you wished this could be normal. He was only cuddling you because he ended up falling asleep here beside you. You just were savouring the moment, that's all. In no normal circumstances would he ever... the thought hurt to continue. His claws dug into you as he began waking.

He finally mumbled again, before clumsily jolting. "Wh-whwher- whh- carnnal?"

"Good morning," you awkwardly mumbled back. "You, uh, fell asleep here."

"Ohhg my god," he clumsily struggled to sit upright. "I'm so-soorry I should go," your phone light softly illuminated his face - he was flushed, even in this lighting, and looked just as embarassed as he sounded.

"No, no, it's okay, I didn't mind," you gave him your most earnest expression. "You... uh. It helped me sleep. I liked it."

"Youu- you did?" His voice was still slurred from sleep. Oh, goodness, it was so cute.

"Is that weird to admit?" You giggled, the laugh originating more from your nerves than anything actually funny.

"I- I did too," he mumbled stupidly. Something about the combination of him being groggy from just waking up, and embarassed at the same time filled you with desires you didn't know you had. Cuteness aggression, you believed it was called.

"Do you... wanna stay with me, or go back to your room?" You offered. You prayed he'd stay with you: it felt strange to admit, but it'd hurt if he left.

"Can I... go pee?"

You blankly stared at him before you caved. You giggled wildly. "Okay, okay, go pee. Get out."

He got out of the blankets, swung his legs over, and stumbled off. You could hear him entering the washroom, then shortly after: a flush. The sink running as he washed his hands and claws. Then the light flicked off.

Then he was at your door again.

"Can... I come back?" He spoke in a small voice.

"If you want, I'd like it if you stayed-"

You didn't finish your sentence before he was crawling back in behind you. He was... clingy?

Green gloved arms wrapped around you in a velvet embrace. "I'm sorry," he mumbled sleepily.

"Why are you sorry?" You tried to look over your shoulder but couldn't.

"I'll regret this later maybe," he breathed, voice becoming less slurred, but still weighed in exhaustion. "I- aft- after today... I just. I want to be close. That's all."

"Can you move in front of me, then," you whispered. "Please?"

He obliged, clumsily clambering over you - still careful to avoid the burns hiding under your oversized pajama shirt - and wriggled into the blankets in front of you.

"I didn't know you could be cuddly," you rasped.

"S'why I don't like getting drunk 'round others," he sleepily confirmed. "Real embarassing."

"Oh." Was all you could utter. You'd love to see him drunk, you decided.

The silence was a little deafening.

"Would it be weird... to ask if you could like..." your heart was thundering as you struggled to finally utter it. "Cuddle... me again...?"

His breath caught, and he obliged. He shifted to lay on his side, facing you, and awkwardly shuffled closer. One slender green arm wrapped around your waist, careful to avoid your wounded shoulder, and the other...

"Can you lift your head?" His voice was so, so gentle.

You lifted your head for him. His other arm made its way under your neck, so he could, ever so gingerly, wrap that arm around you, too. Your face was pressed into his collar. Despite the awkward shapes of Pippinses heads, this felt... natural, and comfortable. You smiled into his chest. You wrapped your arm around his shoulders. This was nice. Scary, and intimidating, but nice. Melting into him felt like heaven, the idea of staying like this forever seemed like a wonderful idea.

Battat out a long, slow exhale. "I'm sorry if this is weird..."

"No, it's. It's fine. I asked for it." You breathed into him.

"Why?"

"I..." the words felt caught in your throat, nerves bouncing all throughout your body. "I... uh..."

You buried your face into him, hoping you could shrink and disappear.

"Feelsafearoundyou."

He let out a shakier exhale.

"I hope you do..." his own voice barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry I'm so... weak. And can't protect you." The arm around your waist tightened, while the other didn't budge - it was too close to your burns.

"You don't have to worry about protecting me-"

"Don't be stupid," he interrupted in a whisper, his sleepiness gone. "Someone has to."

You lifted your head up to look at him. "You already do so much,"

That took him off guard.

Your gaze travelled away as you stammered through. "I know... you're always supposed to be at my side, anyway, until Tenna decides I can be free, but with everything going on, being around you I feel... normal. I feel safe. You're always looking out for me. You're always keeping guard. You feed me well. You comfort me when I'm freaking out. You're always there... and I know that- I know that you're just 'supposed' to do that, but... I'd like to do this with you even if you weren't supposed to." You met his gaze in the dimly lit room - the lights from the kitchen being your only window to seeing him at all still, as you struggled to speak through your nervousness. "I'd like to... be around... you for a long time."

His lips met yours unthinkingly before he quickly pulled back.

"So-sorry I'm sorry I didn't think I'm sorry-"

"N-no, please do it agai-"

His lips met your again, and you weakly exhaled as your body was instantly reacting: heart racing, breath quickening, arm reaching for him. He pulled you closer, his own breaths ragged and frantic. The arm around your neck wrapped to ever so gently hold the back of your head while the other greedily pulled you closer. Your own claws kneaded at his back as you pressed into him. You whined at everything - his touch, the relief of finally having him react to you with affection, and the hunger for him. He whimpered right after you.

He shoved a leg between your thighs and pulled you closer - seemingly spurred on by your noises. You eagerly squeezed towards him, your legs tangled with his. You two could hardly do anything beyond frantically kissing and trying desperately to get closer, bodies tightly pressed against each other. Something firm of his pressed into you - exciting you further. His tongue slid into your mouth, tentatively then ravenously trying to taste you, before he pulled back - both of your hearts racing. The two of you were panting, sweaty, dishevelled.

"Oh my god," he whispered shakily. "I- I'm sorry- I-"

"It's okay, it's fine-"

"No, I-I need to go," he quickly pulled away, still panting, as he scrambled away. "I can't be doing this to you- I- I'm- I'm not a good person, I'm sorry,"

You were taken aback. "What?"

"I- I shouldn't be- I'm supposed to look after you, parole bullshit, yeah," he was picking his poncho up off your floor. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be taking advantage of you, forgive me," he shouldered his way out the door, holding his poncho to hide his lower half.

Taking advantage of you? You frowned at the now-empty doorway, listening to his footsteps retreat, closing his door behind him. You were... perfectly fine with whatever he wanted to do. Embarrassingly enough.

But a small part of you was thrilled that he reciprocated at all.

You didn't fall back asleep.

You'd settled for loose clothing - nothing to hide your chest, no tshirt, no uniform. Just a loosely-buttoned flannel shirt and pj pants. You didn't want anything chafing or touching the wound, really, but you didn't want... your entire neck and shoulder area exposed, either. You stood in the bathroom, door open, frowning at yourself in the mirror.

The antibiotic ointment the Ambyu-Lance had given you sat forebodingly on the sink counter as you tugged your shirt off your shoulder, twisting to see it.

God. It was disgusting.

At least it wasn't a third degree burn, you sighed internally as you stared at the dark pinkish-red hand mark. It wrapped around your entire shoulder and collar, the finger imprints leaving large bold stripes down your collarbone. Some parts were blistered, almost looking sweaty. A shower seemed dreadful, picturing water beating down on the wound. A part of you wanted to cry - this wound was pretty horrific to look at. Why on earth would it do this to you? The healing spell from the Ambyu-Lance did wonders, still, including keeping the pain from getting too bad... but this was still just so wretched to look at. You shrivelled up at the sight of yourself and prayed it wouldn't scar - the last thing you wanted was a visual reminder of your trauma, forever grabbing your attention. Literally.

Tears stung at your eyes anyway.

You popped open the bottle and gently tugged off your gloves. In that moment, you really didn't care if he came out and saw you half shirtless with your gloves off, tears on your face, twisting in the bathroom mirror trying to clean the burn before you put the antibiotics on.

You choked a little at the stinging pain, your hands violently trembling as you tried to gently scrub with soap and water... no matter how gently you tried, it burned. It burned so badly. Your breathing was laboured.

"Do... do you need help?" Battat's voice very tentatively offered.

You hadn't noticed him leave his room, nor had you noticed his cautious footsteps pad their way towards you.

You looked at him for a moment, before turning away sharply. You didn't want him to see you finally crying. His expression had looked concerned.

"I'm fine,"

"You're... no, you're not, let me help. Sit on the side of the tub," he gently ordered.

Like a sullen child, you did exactly that. You sat closest to the wall, your wound exposed to him, trying not to watch his expression as he took it in again, up close. His voice wavered a

little.

"This'll hurt, but I'll be gentle, okay?"

He only got a nod as your response.

He took off his gloves, and ran the facecloth under the sink, re-soaking it in soap, gently wringing it out before bringing it to you. He sat down beside you.

You kissed your teeth, wincing and whimpering as the wet cloth made contact. The wound was covering so much sensitive spots on you - now alight with pain. Lukewarm water ran down your back uncomfortably. A wobbly almost-sob escaped you.

"I know," he murmured. "It's okay. Let it out. I'll take care of it."

The green Pippins repeated it a few times as he tried his best to not hurt you. It couldn't be helped - it was such a fresh burn. Even with a healing spell to help quell the pain, that was more effective the day the spell was cast. Yesterday. Today it's effects weren't as strong. A small part of you did, however, credit it for your flu being totally gone. What a wretched 24 hours. Tears streamed down your face, only slowly being caught by your wrist.

"Okay, all clean," he murmured. "Want me to put on the ointment too...?"

"Dumb question," you pathetically joked. "Do I look like I can do it right now?" You shot him a broken smile.

"Right. Ugh. You poor thing." He said sympathetically. He got up to wash his hands thoroughly, grab the bottle from the counter and a towel. Right. He had to dry it, too. You hated being alive right now, but his presence was helping. Doing this yourself would've been a much slower, miserable process. He sat down next to you and gently dabbed you all over with the towel - so gently, in fact, you barely felt it. You rested your head in your hands as he began working from the bottom of the burn upwards, cold ointment jolting you only a little. It was almost relieving just how cold it was. He rubbed tiny circles with the back of his claws.

"This would probably be easier if we had something to like... scoop, the ointment out with, instead of using claws like some kinda screwed up birds," he joked. "Like a sponge or really anything."

You let out a wheeze.

"But this will work for now. Kind of awkward, but... I did just wash my claws extra carefully... I've never... seen a burn this bad, or big. But the bottle says twice a day, so, uh, if you need help, I'm just... always here," he awkwardly rambled. "I uh. It's important not to get an infection 'n' all... and I like helping..."

Maybe this morning's semi-almost-a-makeout-session was a bad idea. He could barely talk normally around you. It irritated you how uncomfortable he sounded. He could be normal about this, surely.

"Can you, uh, turn toward me just a little? Yes, like that, th-thanks," he stammered.

Your neck and cheeks heated up with his face so close to you again, as he gingerly scooped the antibiotic with his claws to spread on you, before continuing rubbing small circles to spread it with the backs of his claws. He worked with care and percision - as if he'd studied this in a past life or something. You closed your eyes despite the discomfort, and to avoid further awkwardness.

You weren't crying anymore by the time he leaned back and practically sang to himself. "Good! Great! All done," he sounded relieved. "So twice a day, and it's seven am now, so we can... do this again at seven pm?"

You nodded wordlessly.

"Great, fantastic," he basically jumped away from you. "I'll, uh, go make breakfast."

He quickly rinsed his hands, grabbed his gloves and left. It looked like things were gonna be awkward for a while.

You decided to leave your shirt partly hanging off for a little while - you buttoned up the front for any sense of modesty despite this. Fresh air touching your burn felt cold and biting, but you didn't want your flannel just wiping the medicine off right after Battat so carefully but it on. This was all so inconvenient.

You cleaned up the bathroom and left.

He was on the phone. "No, uh, I mean you can come over, but Cardinal's obviously injured... so no, you can't be grabbing them, Plues. Ugh. Yes. Fine. Just- bastard, hung up on me," he grouched to himself.

You huffed the faintest laugh before drifting to the couch, trying to find a way to get comfortable. You took the remote and flicked on the television, looking for something to watch. Nothing really stood out to you - so you settled on a dramatic cooking show. It wasn't really what you wanted, but it was tense and entertaining, so you decided to let yourself get somewhat invested as a chef yelled at everyone.

Battat brought your breakfast to you - scrambled eggs, hashbrowns and sausages. And a glass of water with three pills... your iron supplements. "Uh, here," he avoided your gaze. "Real glad I'm not on that show, huh."

"Thank you, I... I appreciate it a lot. You're really doing a lot-"

"Literally nothing!" He sounded embarassed as he quickly strode away.

You sighed. "Well, thanks again!" You called after him. He spoiled you, you thought as you ate your breakfast. After you'd scarfed it down, you meekly went to wash the dishes. Moving felt weird and uncomfortable now, but having the sink clean was far more satisfying. Your mind lingered a bit stubbornly on being upset over his strange behaviour around you... it made sense. It was awkward. But it almost hurt in a way. He was caring and avoidant at the same time. Offering to help, then making himself scarce. You just wanted to be normal with

him... and for him to recognize you wanted that closeness from him the same way he was apparently wanting from you.

A knock on the door half an hour later alerted you to re-adjust your shirt. It felt uncomfortable, but the medicine had dried into your skin, so you didn't really need to worry about the fabric rubbing it off... it displeased you to think about how tediously you'd need to care for yourself over the next week. Treating a massive burn wound... you hoped you wouldn't have to call out of work on Monday. But it seemed probable. You'd just have to see how sensitive the burn still was by then. The ponchos would absolutely feel uncomfortable with this.

You clocked back out of your thoughts as Battat answered the door.

Pluey rushed in first, looking around before spotting you and beelining straight for you before he froze.

He let out a careful trill.

"Yes, you can hug me, just under my arms, and avoid my right side," you weakly instructed.

He nodded gleefully - doing exactly that. The warmth of his sweet embrace melted you a little. You liked that he was so shamelessly needy. You wished someone else could take notes... no, no. You didn't need to let yourself feel frustrated just because he withdrew from you, and was being stupid and awkward around you... you tried chasing those thoughts away.

Another whistly tune from Pluey snapped you back. You asked him to repeated himself a little slower, and so he obliged.

"Ah... you and Jongler didn't see..." you breathed. "I got burned pretty bad yesterday." You looked down. "Batt patched me up, though, and helped me with my medicine earlier..."

He seemed to untense at this knowledge.

Jongler slowly made their way to you - scanning you with their big eyeless face, their demeanour as small and harmless as a ten foot darkner could make themself.

"How's yous holdin' up?" They asked shyly.

"Burned," you mumbled.

"I sees the spot on you, with my vision," they responded quietly. "Makes me sad."

Battat hung around in the back of the room, letting his two fellow Mikes examine you.

Pluey let out a questioning trill, so you unbuttoned your shirt and showed him.

For a Shadowguy who exclusively spoke in trills, whistles, and saxophnonic melodies, the screech he let out was rather human.

"Pluey!" Battat snapped.

"It's a big wound, boss," Jongler turned their head to face Battat. "He didn't expect it to be so big, 's'all. We've been worried about yous," Jongler turned their big head back towards you, voice low and empathetic.

"Boss told Big Boss that it was a heart attack, so he's been readin' up on heart attacks..."

You groaned.

"Says it's of utmost importans that yous restin'," the Zapper whirred. "Of course... we wanted to check in, toos." They wobbled their head - infared blush staining their face in sudden bashfulness.

"Did you find any leads on where the... other, Zapper went?" Battat impatiently tapped his feet.

"No, sorry... it's a dead end..." Jongler hung their head. "He coulda teleported anywhere. I was too busy checkin' on Card'nal."

"Well, what did you see when it happened?"

"He teleported behind da door, then came in, grabbed Card... lit 'em up... and was gone." They snapped their fingers. "Just like dat. No security footage anywhere. It's possible they coulda teleported to da basement, cuz there's no security cameras down there... but when I went, there was nothin'."

"This place has a basement?" You sharply asked.

"Real nasty place," Jongler confirmed. "All rotten. I shoulda asked Big Boss to clean it up..."

"I'd like to get a look down there with you or Plues, sometime," Battat stated. "One of you HAS to stay here with Card, though."

The two other Mikes agreed.

"I would like to go, too, just..." you fixed your shirt uncomfortably. "Just when I'm feeling better."

The green die's expression softened. "We can go whenever you're recovered."

Pluey and Jongler stayed the evening - an impromptu sleepover, you supposed. You didn't mind it, really. It made things a bit easier to navigate without Battat being an awkward nurse towards you, and distracted you from thinking too hard about those exchanged kisses and grabs from the morning. You tried to ignore his lingering gazes.

He cooked lasagna for dinner.

Then he took you to the washroom - he scrubbed your wound again, gently as ever, dried it just as softly, and slowly reapplied the antibiotic.

You only cried a little from the pain, each hiccup met with more reassuring murmurs, and empathetic "I know, I know"s from him. His soft words only made you cry a little more. He thought it was just from the wound burning.

When you both got out of the washroom, Pluey practically ran up to you, frantic over your bloodshot eyes.

"It's okay, Plues," you laughed weakly at all the frantic little sounds he was making. "It just hurts to put the medicine on... you've never had a burn, have you?"

He shook his head.

"I have... a lower pain tolerance," you pet his head reassuringly with your left hand. "So I'm more sensitive, that's all. It's just unpleasant."

The Shadowguy sadly cooed at you and wrapped his arms around you - remembering to hug under your arms. You rested your head on his shoulder for a moment before catching a strange look from Battat.

You frowned a little bit in irritation. If he wanted to be closer to you, he could do that in an instant. You all slept on the couch - you were sprawled on your side across Pluey and Jongler. Compared to the two, you were tiny. At only five and a half feet tall, you were only half of Jongler's size and still roughly two feet smaller than Pluey.

You didn't think Zappers even slept, but Jongler was unresponsive, their breathing slow and gentle. Pluey was all too content being used as a pillow. His head resting on the armrest as his jaw hung wide open - the musical snores from him were incredibly cute, you thought.

Battat was curled up on the corner, away from everyone, eyes fixed on you until he too, was snoring.

You slept soundly, safer than ever.

Chapter 12: The calm

When you awoke, Battat was gently tapping your glove.

"Hey. Medicine time."

You groaned and gently wiggled off Pluey and Jongler's sleeping forms. Pluey let out a sad little tune as he lost his Pippins blanket - you. Jongler remained unresponsive, still deep asleep.

You followed Battat to the washroom, and sat down at the tub.

"You don't have to do this, I can myself-"

He shot you a look and you immediately shut up.

He let out a sigh, closing his eyes for a moment, as he took off his gloves and began to prepare to clean your burn. "I do... like helping. I did stuff like this for Tenna all the time when I was able to be Mike more. Dusting his insides, fixing melted wires, antenna massages, tucking him into bed, whole nine yards. I'm worried Plues and Jongler don't do it the way I do."

"Antenna massages? Tucking him in?" You snickered.

"Ye- YES. Don't laugh, he gets real glooby if no one's lookin' after him!"

He came to sit beside you with the soapy facecloth. "Anyways, point is, I feel weird when I'm not doing stuff like this anymore. So like, shut up and tolerate it?"

"Okay," you chuckled, before wincing in pain.

"It looks better than yesterday already," he hummed.

"It does?"

"It's still... bad, but it it looks less fresh, I guess? I dunno. Take me at my word."

You simply nodded, and kissed your teeth at the sting.

"I don't think you'd be able to reach some of this, actually. It's pretty big and goes to just midway through your shoulderblades, and wraps around your neck... ugh. I wish I never left you in that room."

"I already said it's fine, shut up."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

"I wanna talk to you," you blurted.

"Wh-"

"About yesterday morning?"

"We don't need to-"

"We do." You looked over your shoulder at him, before remembering you had to turn to face the other Pippins anyway - so he could get your singed collar.

He sighed and hung onto silence for a moment, before he finally quietly spoke. "I feel dirty about it. I feel like I'm taking advantage of you, like some kinda sicko."

"You're not." You forced him to make eye contact with you. His eyes were such a pretty green.

"I'm not supposed to be... making out with the person I'm supposed to be keeping out of trouble. Feels like an abuse of power." His eyes lowered. It was definitely troubling him.

"I wanted it," you huffed, embarassment gone. You were half naked in front of him as he cleaned your burn before treating it with antibiotic cream with his bare hands. Any shame was already out the window. "I'm literally close to you in age, the only power imbalance is... in your head. Nothing about our workplace is normal or healthy anyway. I've liked you for a while either way so why would I give a shit?"

His eyes widened, darting to meet yours, then away again, his skin turning a soft meadowy green. "What?" He whispered.

"Nothing in this workplace is normal?" You played dumb. Oh yeah, the embarassment was back.

"Nonono, after that."

"'Or healthy'."

"I hate you so much," he laughed. "Stupid ass."

"Love you too." You smirked.

That earned a flustered look and him looking away again.

"But it's true," you laughed nervously. "I... have liked you."

"Ah, past tense," he also laughed nervously.

"Uh, present tense given yesterday?"

"Ah." He went quiet. He opened the antibiotic cream and focused really hard on staring at it. "I, uh..." his voice dropped to near inaudible. "Guess I feel the same."

"Just stop being weird about it," you puffed. "There's no power to imbalance."

"I don't want you thinking you have to... do things with me... for me to tell Tenna you've been good," he rasped. "It crossed my mind and I feel so terrible about it."

"You tuck our boss into bed and massage his antennas while dressed as another man. I think we're more equal than whatever is going on with that. I don't want us to waste time over nonissues when we have bigger fish to fry."

He burst out laughing. "Okay... maybe you're right."

You laughed together for a couple minutes. He gently put a big... glob of ointment onto your wound - the cold sensation made you jolt, quickly causing him to sputter quiet apologies, as you rushed to reassure him it was just because the medicine was cold.

"So now what?" He mumbled.

"I don't know."

"How long have you... liked me...?" He sounded uncharacteristically shy. It was rare seeing his eyes so wide.

"Oh god, I don't know," you laughed nervously. "I thought you were pretty before all of this even happened, I guess?"

"Pretty..." he echoed, tasting the compliment. "I've... pretty..."

Putting medicine onto you seemed to be what tethered him to holding a thought.

"So, uh. You liked me back when you... put that blanket on me...?"

"... guess so," you confirmed. "So we like.. like each other?"

"Yeah," he admitted. "Seems to be the case... I feel dumb not knowing it sooner."

You laughed lightly as he worked his way up your burn. "I thought I was obvious?"

"No!" He hissed in embarassment. "You're always barely responding!! And hiding!! And you look happier in groups than just with me!!! And-and you're always letting Pluey snuggle you!!" He said the last part too quickly.

Laughter had you in a chokehold as you tried so hard to be still for him. It was harder than it sounded to not be doubled over laughing. "Pluey???"

"YES," he blurted. "Oh my god, do you not see him all over you?!"

"Yeah but he's-"

"Just Italian!!!!"

"No I was gonna say, he just seems to be like that," you were struggling to breathe. "He does it to you AND Jongler?"

He huffed. "Okay, TRUE-"

"Are you... jealou-"

"I'm never-"

Your laughter interrupted him again- his face softened before he got defensive again, and he laughed with you.

"Okay, maybe that was uncalled for,"

"Maybe?!"

"Okay, okay, stay still, I'm almost done," he laughed once more. "Then you're free from my grasp."

You looked at him with a small, teasing smile. "Maybe I don't wanna leave your grasp?"

His breath caught, his already flushed cheeks getting greener. "Okay, now you're doing this on purpose,"

"A little."

He shook his head, as ivory claws finished rubbing the antibiotics onto your burns. "Okay, well, before I release you," - he said 'release' with a bit more exaggeration - "can I..." his voice got small, shy. "Try... and do... this properly to you, now that I'm not half asleep?"

You nodded innocently.

He took your face with one hand, and very gently guided it to his own. His mouth met yours in a modest peck on the lips.

He pulled back, a wobbly smile on his face. "That's better."

You were breathless as you stared adoringly at him, resting a hand on his leg.

"Okay, sweetheart," he teased. "We gotta go back to the main room now,"

"You gotta get out first. I need to use the washroom... I did just wake up," you reminded him. You tried very hard to ignore him calling you sweetheart. Maybe later it'd swirl in your mind.

"Alright, I'm outta here," he chuckled and left.

He seemed like he was quickly relaxing again - until you heard him loudly exclaim, "what the HELL are you doing so close to the door?!"

You burst out laughing as you moved to the toilet. Idiots.

You were in and out quickly, your mind feverishly replaying that sweet kiss. He was so, so disgustingly sweet. Sweeter than anything you'd experienced in your life, easily. Your head spun thinking of him. Battat, the grouchy coworker who'd always been prickly and cold, now

tending to your wounds and kissing you and calling you sweetheart. You kicked your feet and smiled so hard your cheeks hurt. You washed your claws and rejoined the others, very carefully trying to cover the wound.

Pluey was in the middle of teasing Battat about something - you didn't know what, you saw Battat's green glove smack him in the back of the head. Only Jongler greeted you normally.

"Mornin', Card'nal," they buzzed pleasantly.

"Good morning, Jongler," you singsonged to them. "You too, Pluey, good morning."

Pluey whistled in delight.

"Today's gonna be another indoor day," Battat declared. "Or laundry if we get the chance..." he stopped to stretch and yawn. "Breakfast, first, I'm hungry. How do we all feel about pancakes?"

"Love em," you purred.

"Sounds good t'me," Jongler wobbled their head enthusiastically.

A delighted trill.

"My audience loves me so much," Battat sighed dramatically. "Tenna should replace himself and leave me in charge of the cooking show. Ratings would be so high."

He wasn't kidding. His pancakes were wonderful- he topped yours with raspberries and blueberries with powdered sugar. You melted as you ate, and he looked incredibly pleased with himself. He took care to give everyone berries with theirs. Presentation was everything, after all. His acute attention to detail, you thought, really did make him a great candidate for the heavy duty job of being Tenna's shadow: Mike.

After breakfast, you'd all moved back to the couch. The three all got serious in their discussion about pursuing that Zapper, any leads.

"Pluey's had the best look at 'im," Jongler stated. "But even dat wasn't for long. I caught a glimpse, but it wasn't... anything identifiable," they sounded troubled.

"I don't think I've seen this Zapper at all," Battat frowned. "All of you have, but they're always gone by the time I arrive on the scene."

Pluey whistled.

"I don't know any Zappers besides Jong, idiot," Battat glared. "Why would I? I have you guys. I don't feel the need to socialize. Of course I don't know anyone else."

"I don't know what their problem with me is," you offered. "I also don't know any Zappers besides Jong, and the one Zapper with a girlfriend... a Pippins. So we're looking for someone who wants to hurt a Pippins, I guess. They wouldn't be someone loitering around us."

"I hate it," Battat spat. "We're Pippins. We're the smallest. We can't hold our own against Zappers, why can't he pick on someone his own size?"

"I'm thinkin'," Jongler began. "I could try ta be around da other Zappers... maybe not ask around, but see who gives me a dirty look for bein' nice to Pippinses..."

"That could get us somewhere," you hummed. "Like just... field observations."

"Ugh," Battat groaned. "Digging through everyone's files feels like a dead end, I have names but no leads. I hate that we have to basically feel it out. Be live bait."

"Youse won't be bait," Jongler assured. "I'll even stick by yous, Boss, so you and Card'nal aren't vulnerable."

"How will we accomplish that?" Battat huffed. "You can't be two places at once."

Pluey whistled again.

"Ugh. This is just becoming harder for us all to work normally."

"Maybe," Jongler commented. "But if it means we sees this through and gets answers, dat's all I care about. I don't mind da inconvenience."

Pluey harmonized in agreement, nodding solemnly, then adding more: in his shadowspeak, he commented he was willing to lay down his life.

"I hope it doesn't come to that..." you mumbled.

"I wish we Pippinses could protect ourselves without needing bodyguards," Battat growled. "It'd be real nice to not have to live in fear this way."

You couldn't help but secretly agree. You wondered if that's why Battat admitted before to carrying, and why he was so quick to suggest firearms to you.

"Let's try to enjoy da day," Jongler whirred. "Tomorrow, me 'n' Plues can carry Mike duties, mess with da schedules a bit... coordinate us workin' together. Dat way it goes smoother."

"Sounds like a good idea," you shot a look to Battat.

He reluctantly nodded.

You couldn't help but feel bad... he was insecure about being a Pippins, that was clear. From day one you suspected it - mostly because of the reputation Pippinses had. But now you were getting a clearer picture, between his role as Mike, having to essentially dote on the CRT who didn't really like Pippins, to... this. A life-threatening situation, that's already left one of you badly wounded, and completely helpless. No Pippins attack could really do much to a Zapper, even stronger Pippinses: they were still just over twice your size, stronger, and able to snap you in half. No wonder it bothered Battat so much - having to feel like he may need protection to must be a sore spot. You'd made a mental note to apologize later for this happening.

The day was lazy, to your relief. Lots of video gaming, snacking, lazing about. Pluey was near glued to you at all times, and even Jongler would repeatedly check in. The attention made you blush - they were so kind.

You were also relieved at your improving relationship with Battat - even if he was a dummy. You didn't wanna loiter on awkward feelings, on any poor communication, any doubts... at least for now. You had much bigger fish to fry than him being insecure about kissing you, you'd decided, and you were happy that was smoothed out nearly as quickly as it came up. Though, mentally you kicked yourself for not asking the iconic "what are we?" Question. Roommates who kiss? Maybe? Sort of partners, but not confirmed? You frowned into space. Yeah. You should've asked. But now you can't do that with Pluey and Jongler around.

Jongler's gentle, low voice caught your attention, as they leaned toward you.

"How's yous? I wanted to ask..."

"I'm okay," you tried to sound normal. "The burn hurts, uh, I'm a little scared of going to work tomorrow, but I think I'm okay. I'm getting along better with Batt?"

They wobbled in satisfaction. "Youse are safe. We're not gonna let you or Boss outta our sight...
I'm really happy youse are gettin' along now, though, seemed real rough at first."

"Ahaha, was it ever," you scratched the back of your head bashfully. "I'm happy he's nicer to me... I really like being around y'all. I'm worried he's not sleeping well, though," you added quietly.

"He's bad for dat," they buzzed. "He's always a bad sleeper, but sometimes stuff keeps him up lots. He's just... a real thinker, dat one."

You nodded.

"I trust you'll take care of him," they gently teased.

"Ohhh, shush, you," you hid your face with one of your hands, pretending to shoo them away with the other. "You're too silly."

They rumbled a soft laugh.

Dinner came and went - quesadillas, to your delight, and Battat shooed Pluey and Jongler out after you'd all been fed. "I gotta help apply medicine aaand get ready for tomorrow," Battat huffed facetiously. "I can't have you big dorks here any longer!"

Jongler gave you a tender, one-armed hug and electronic whispers of reassurance and comfort. "Yous gonna be okay. We will get to da bottom of dis and you'll never be endangered again. Promise. Seeya tomorrow, Card'nal."

Pluey showered your cheeks in kisses, gently harmonizing his goodnights. He tried to do the same for Battat, only to earn a half hearted slap - Pluey burst out into musical laughter, with Jongler and your giggles quickly following.

And then they were gone.

Battat lead you to the washroom again.

"Has it been hurting today?" He asked, the joking tone from earlier gone, now replaced with tender concern.

"Only a little," you hummed. "It's not pleasant."

"I bet."

"Uh... thank you, by the way,"

"It's nothing." He gave your arm a gentle squeeze as he sat you down, taking off his gloves to prepare the medicinal ritual you'd have to do for the week. "I like helping." He reiterated. "Again: I don't think that's an easy wound to treat by yourself, anyway."

"Ugh... I'd like to do it myself but you're right. It's too awkward of an angle for me..." you sighed, frustrated. "I feel like a little kid being cared for by mommy. Except I don't have a mom."

"Me neither, it's fine." He was getting the facecloth soapy for you. "I guess I'm usually a caretaker for Tenna, anyway, this comes naturally to me."

You nodded. "I noticed you're... attentive with that kinda stuff."

He blushed, and tried to hide his embarassment with sarcasm. "Jeez, look at you, seein' my soft side."

You laughed, until he sat down.

The hot facecloth stung - you wondered how long it'd be uncomfortable to clean it. You'd been instructed to clean the wound each time before rubbing ointment into it, but... it was burnt flesh. It was most certainly uncomfortable. But it didn't make you cry anymore. How absurd that you, a former criminal, had a low pain tolerance. You wondered how much of your scars his eyes would trace as he cleaned and dressed your wound. You'd gotten a lot over the years, and still, that pathetic pain tolerance - or lack thereof - never improved. But you handled internal pain just fine. Of course you did.

You kissed your teeth in response to the sting, earning his gentle repeatings of "It's okay. It's fine."

Your eyes met his.

He looked away, flushing.

Your body burned, but not from the wound.

"Battat," you mumbled.

"Yeah?"

"What... are we?"

"I don't... I don't know yet," he awkwardly responded. "Probationer and Parole Officer who like each other too much?" He gave a dumb little laugh.

"Maybe... more than that?" You tested gently, your voice quiet and timid.

He was silent as he dabbed your burns dry. "I'd... I'd like that. M-maybe we could be official after all this is over? Or, uh, now. But I think I'd like it to be a bit more special than-"

"Cleaning my wounds as I sit half shirtless in frontta you. Got it." You gave a small, teasing smirk.

He shrunk a little, face turning green as blush crept up his features.

"Maybe a nice dinner or something."

"I don't know if we should... sleep in our beds tonight," you cautiously tried. "But on the couch?"

"You wanna sleep on the couch?"

"I'd really like more cuddles," you snorted finally.

"Pfft. All you gotta do is ask," he responded weakly. His smile gave away that he was excited at the idea.

After he was done, you kicked him out of the bathroom.

"I can't shower normally," you'd explained. "So I'm gonna take a bath."

He nodded. "I'll be in the main room if you need me."

"If I need you to help me bathe, then I'm the biggest baby on the planet. Get outta here," you laughed, pushing him out.

"I wasn't trying to stay in here!" He sputtered, laughter spilling into his voice.

The bath was... really nice. Sure, you had to sit up a bit awkwardly. But rinsing and cleaning yourself felt nice. You tried to avoid getting your burns wet - maybe you should've bathed first, THEN had him dress the wound, but the idea of scrubbing it even by yourself felt a little miserable.

The hot water was nice. You sighed comfortably, before resting your arms on the side of the tub. The thought of Battat on the other side of the door helped keep you feeling safe and comfortable, too.

Despite everything, despite all of the fear and anxiety you'd been experiencing, this thing blossoming between you and your green companion had become something of a lifeline.

You got out, got into your clothes again, folded the towels and made it out of the bathroom.

He smiled up at you from his spot at the table.

"Hey, uh, wanna... sleep on the couch together still?" You asked as sweetly as you could, praying it wasn't obvious you were shy about asking.

"If you let me shower first," he chuckled. "Can't be smelling like sweat while cuddling."

Your eyes widened and you nodded. The idea of smelling him again at all had your heart racing. You tried to play it cool.

"Well. Yeah. I'll be here til you're out."

He snorted a laugh, before folding his laptop shut and bringing it to his room. He came out with pajamas folded in his arms, and headed to the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

You excitedly sat on the couch, scrolling short videos and social media - anything to keep yourself busy until he was ready for you. You practically vibrated with anticipation... all of this over cuddling. You felt like you were young again.

He finally came out, shinier from the fresh cleanse, in an oversized black shirt, gloves, and TV Time!-branded pajama pants. He really was such a dork. But it only further endeared him to you. You were just a different breed of dork, anyway - red flannel pajama pants and still only wearing a loosely-buttoned flannel as a shirt. In your defense, you had a massive injury. Otherwise, you'd probably be wearing one of your own many oversized band shirts.

You both awkwardly assessed the couch before he decided, "we'll sleep in the corner of the L," and tried to arrange the pillows and blankets. "I'll be on the inside, you on the outside, so like... your shoulder isn't bothered."

"I appreciate the consideration," you laughed. Butterflies were flying around inside of you at speeds you didn't know you could experience.

He smiled at you before flopping onto the couch, arms outstretched.

"'Kay, loser, get in here."

"Loser?! Ohh, when I get you," you crawled in, pressing yourself to him.

He let out a shaky exhale. "Sorry, I'm... ah. So new to this, but I could get used to this..."

"I hope you never do," you breathed a small laugh. "You're cute when embarassed."

"I'll get used to it to spite you," he laughed.

You could tell cracking jokes to him was making it easier for him to ease into this, so that was how you decided to move forward.

"I'll find new ways to fluster you, bet."

"You're- you're a devil, you know."

You laughed and scooted down to bury your face in his chest.

"As long as I'm yours."

"If you're my devil, what am I?" He mumbled, giggling quietly.

"My green bean. My meanie greenie."

"Oh. Those are horrible," he wheezed. "I hate you. Wh- hey- don't look up at me like that!! I only hate you in this percise second! I won't hate you in two minutes!! Ohh my god!! Let's just sleep!! Asshole!!"

You giggled one more time and buried your face again. His heart pounded wildly against you. His arms were wrapped around your neck and waist again - you figured to avoid touching your burns. It was sweet how much he was considering you at all times, even if it was hard to return the favour. It's not like he was injured or sick and you could extend the same attention. But maybe helping him sleep was a good alternative. You decided to shut up and let his heart race until, it too, began to tire. His breathing slowed. You knew he was out when he began kneading his claws as he fell asleep, only to go still save for his long, deep, steady breaths.

It was typically harder for you to fall asleep - now with your own heart racing against his lower ribs. But you made it.

You dreamt of kisses, warm embraces, snowy date nights, until something rudely awoke you.

You and Battat both leapt in fright at the loud sounds.

A siren going off.

"What the fuck-?" Battat was breathless - clearly shocked by the sudden blaring sirens.

You checked the time. 5:34AM.

Tenna's voice rang out, slightly muffled - the intercoms were in the hallway. You both scrambled for the door to hear what was being announced.

"There will be no work today, I'm sorry. Under no circumstances can anyone leave their rooms today except for authorized personnel."

The next sentences made your blood run cold.

"The body of a Pippins was found in stairwell 2B. Please stay indoors until we have more information."

Chapter 13: Confrontation I

Chapter Summary

Happy Halloween! 😊

It didn't take long for your phones to blow up.

Coworkers, friends, acquaintances, groupchats all blowing up with text messages, asking if you were okay, asking "are the homies ok???" "Who was murked??" Others confirming "we're alive", and more solemn "everyone stay safe" "prayers".

Battat's phone seemingly was blowing up, too. He answered the first call.

"Card and I are safe," was the first words out of his mouth. "They were literally in my arms all night."

"Thank goodness," Jongler's voice sounded strangled. "I gotta go in a sec, boss, but big boss is freakin' out..."

"Understandably," Battat's voice shook a little. "Just... do your best out there. I don't think I coulda stomached seeing it."

"It's awful, Batts. Gotta run. Dey want big boss 'n' I to examine and identify the body soon..."

Tenna's voice could be heard in the background, then a click.

Battat dialled another - Pluey.

Frantic, terrified whistles and tones could be heard, nearly peaking the phone's mic.

"Plues, Plues, it's okay, Card and I are safe, they're right beside me, they can say hi if it helps," he frantically tried to reassure.

"Hi Pluey! We're safe!" You rose your voice so he could hear.

His saxophonic melodies were less frantic, but the fear was still there. He was begging you both to stay inside.

"We will, we won't move a muscle, no sir," Battat tried to sound lighthearted, but failed miserably. He was scared, too. "The door's double locked. If you wanna slink through the shadows, you can come camp with us."

Pluey sounded relieved.

You checked your phone again. Notifications were still blowing up a mile a minute - fearful chatter in the poker group, random friends checking in. A social media post from the Weather Duo going around stating to keep things tactful and pray for the family of the victim.

One name didn't show up among your contacts.

Rye.

You called him.

No response.

You called him again.

Still, no response.

You called again.

No response.

Your heart sank to your stomach. You held onto the couch for support as you tried one last time.

You called again.

No response.

Maybe he was talking to others. Right. That's fair. You were still best friends - he probably was addressing family, other friends, right? He'd get back to you. Of course he would. He always did. He'd never just go and get killed on you. Hahaha. No. That's absurd. He wouldn't.

You called.

Again.

No response.

You sank to the floor.

You barely noticed he was trying to get your attention until Battat started shaking you.

"Hey! Hey! What's wrong?!"

You choked. "Rye..." you looked up at Battat helplessly.

He grabbed your phone as you lifted to show him.

He let out a small sound. "Ohh... oh god. Okay. I'll text Jong, ask them to let me know, okay? It's probably not Rye. He'll call you back. I'm sure of it. Hang in there. Can I take your phone from you?"

Probably for the better. You nodded. He shut off the screen and pocketed it.

"Just, just watch the TV, okay? I'll be back. Just distract yourself. No use panicking, okay? I'll be right there with you in a moment, sweetheart."

It took a few moments to pull yourself off the floor and amble to the couch.

He was right.

Rye would get back to you.

Of course he would. How silly to think otherwise. You were spiralling over nothing. It's better Battat hold onto your phone until he knew you wouldn't be obsessively trying to reach your friend.

Battat was pacing and texting, while you tried not to think about hurling from the stomach-dropping realization you hadn't heard from Rye... not only this morning, but since last week. Rumours fly around TV World. There was no way news of your "heart attack" didn't make waves - you knew darkners saw you being rushed out of the building. He hadn't come by, called, or even texted. Things were so crazy for you that you'd paid it no mind.

Just... no. Stop spiralling. He'll get back to you.

You pathetically watched the television - not really paying attention to the broadcast. Staying off the News was for the best right now.

Even after he put his own phone down, Battat was still pacing - a blur of green walking circles into the floor. He was troubled. You watched him until he finally remembered you

were there, and beelined for you, putting himself as close as he could beside you, carefully positioning himself on your left side.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"It's gonna be alright, just... don't mind me," he mumbled. "Things are bad, and scary. Normally I'd be Mike right now. But I... it's whatever. I'm restless, I know you are too, but it's gonna be okay. Okay?"

You nodded.

"I don't think I can stomach seeing a murdered Pippins," he suddenly whispered. He stared forward. "I don't think I could handle it even as Mike."

"I don't think most can," your hand covered his with a squeeze. "We're both scared."

He nodded.

It was terrifying to be a Pippins right now.

Your eyes stung, before tears took over. He leaned against you. You leaned into him.

You hiccuped. "I'm scared, Batt. It's after me and someone's dead because of it."

"We'll get them." He breathed. "If it's the last thing I do."

It was a horrible waiting game to hear anything back - you and Battat avoided the news, mostly for your sake, and he'd occasionally get up to see what was being discussed.

He didn't need to theorize - he knew the culprit was a Zapper.

You heard his phone buzz. A click as he picked up.

"Jong," he breathed.

"Boss..."

"Was it..."

"... insides were fried," Jongler's voice was distant. "I feel awful, boss."

"Ugh... I'm sorry, Jongler."

"I'll be okay," the kindhearted Zapper reassured. "It's just... hard ta stomach."

"Did they identify who was killed?"

You spaced out - you barely heard Jongler, but it wasn't hard to discern the syllables of your best friend's first and last names.

Battat dropped his phone before quickly picking it up.

"You're wrong. Tell me you're wrong."

"I'm sorry..."

"I- fuck. Fuuuuck. God damnit." Battat sounded anguished. "I gotta... fuck. God. Thanks for telling me, Jong. Please keep Tenna stable for me."

"Will do, boss. I'm sorry again..."

"See ya soon."

"Roger."

Click.

Battat shuddered, and let out a sigh.

You knew.

Tears were already streaming as you watched him look at you before making his way towards you, sitting beside you, holding your gloved claws in his.

This couldn't be happening.

"You... you heard all that," he stated. It wasn't a question.

You nodded.

"I'm sorry."

Your face scrunched up as you fought back sobs.

He opened his arms and held you tight.

You really didn't know how long you two were like that - you cried and cried and cried.

You'd never hear Rye's soft laughs again. You'd never meet his kind eyes again, or hide in his shadow. You'd never see his bulky frame in the cafeteria to run to. You'd never hear him play guitar, play games with him, listen to him softly complain about boy problems. You'd never chatter with him while travelling to Cyber City again. You'd never sit through long doctor's appointments, or spend long nights comfortably quiet with him.

He was gone.

Forever.

He was gone.

And you didn't even say goodbye - you found out through Jongler telling Batt over the phone and just happening to overhear it.

You were devastated.

You sleepwalked through the day - catatonic, unresponsive. Battat was clearly concerned. He tried repeatedly to speak to you, but nothing really went through. You didn't even react to the pain of scrubbing your wounds and redressing it. You didn't touch your food, or your medicine, anything. You only slightly leaned into Pluey when he'd come by to check in, greeting you with his hugs before Battat told him. He was gone shortly after. Battat tried so, so hard to distract you, hold you, be close. But nothing helped. Your best friend was killed.

Hours passed.

More attempts at feeding you, trying to talk to you, even giving up and napping with his head in your lap. Waking up to redress your injuries again.

A thought came into your head - a sick, twisted little thought that took root.

This Zapper was after you. It was obvious who killed Rye.

You may as well mark it for the others.

You shuddered once at the thought - but maybe giving it a fight would put an end to this. Maybe if you could even leave a small mark on it, the Mikes would see. Your friends. Battat. It was probably suicidal but it took your best friend's life and as long as you kept hiding, Pluey, Jongler, and most of all Battat would become targets. Pluey and Jongler could hold their own. Battat, like you, was still a Pippins.

You were both small. Weak. Powerless. Easy to corner, easy to hurt, easy to disorient and wound. Battat was green, so unlike the other Pippinses, he stood out like a sore thumb. Maybe that almost worked in his favour - everyone would notice if he suddenly disappeared forever, he'd be an unsavoury target. Unless the Zapper wanted to traumatize everyone. You couldn't bear the thought... you loved him. You'd stupidly fallen so hard for him, so desperately, and maybe even thinking about this was only going to hurt him.

But maybe you could save him.

You waited until it was bed time.

He offered to sleep on the couch again. You kindly told him you'd like that, just needed some space tonight. You'd sleep on opposite ends.

He obliged with a heartbroken little frown that he immediately tried to hide. It hurt. He was a gentleman. He just wanted to soothe you.

You waited until he'd been snoring for an hour before you got up silently, drifting to your room.

You put on your uniform, ignoring the dull stinging as your clothes weighed on it - the first contact in days that wasn't an oversized flannel, aged with softened fabric. It wasn't pleasant, but you wanted to be presentable. You got on your hands and knees and looked under the bed.

Yes.

It was still there.

You grabbed the pistol.

Every Pippins had a flashlight - it was almost obligatory working here. You grabbed yours. Capable of being clipped to hoods or pockets to make working while using them easier.

You unlocked both locks as silently as possible, breathing slowly and moving as close to a snail as you could, praying he was in a deep enough sleep to not hear you.

His snoring continued.

"I love you. I'm sorry." You whispered into the darkness before you left, closing the door behind you so gently, that his snores were still louder.

It was essentially a suicide mission. You'd be lucky if anyone came to your rescue.

The hallways were dark - all dimly lit to signify it was bedtime in TV world, despite the dark world being perpetually plunged in darkness.

The elevator's "B" button was faded. It really wasn't somewhere people really went, it was more like an abandoned storage unit than anything else. When Tenna expanded TV world, more storage closets spawned on the main floor - so there was less and less use for the basement storage. It was a common belief part of the basement's abandonment had to do with a former business partner Tenna wanted nothing more to do with.

The "B" floor, was more of a large room, with a set of stairs going down.

You flicked on your flashlight.

Dust particles danced in front of the light like snow. The green wallpaper was discoloured, fading, peeling off the walls before you even got to the stairs. Pistol in one hand and flashlight in the other, you made your way down.
Your shoes clinked against the metallic stairs - feeling like beating drums to whatever lurked down here. You'd always heard rumours of the basement being haunted, but by a freaky ghost cat.

That sounded a lot friendlier than the foe you knew was lurking.

All was silent except for your shoes against the groaning wooden floors - this time, you could feel your heartbeat, hammering wildly; begging for you to stop being stupid. To run, go back,

jump into Battat's arms and feel safe.

Broken, rusted pipes hung from the ceiling. The walls were decaying - plaster and drywall crumbling and sinking from almost anywhere you looked. Everything was rotten, decayed, falling apart. Darkness threatened to envelop everything.

Some walls were completely caved in - revealing knocked over furniture and boxes. Whiteboards with smears over old schedules, vandalized posters, a strange rusty colour on the floors and walls. This place was horrifying in its own right - how Tenna didn't even try to clean up this place was beyond you. You'd hoped your nightmare wasn't a premonition, but here you were in the decayed basement, your flashlight and the sounds of your boots against the floor signifying your presence. Being a Shadowguy would've been real handy here.

This basement felt like it stretched on forever. It'd been abandoned for so long, it was a wonder Tenna didn't just zap it out of existence. You knew the iron giant had reality-warping abilities, so why keep this horrifying basement?

Either way - you had a simple mission.

Mark the Zapper. You'd be either dead or alive, doesn't matter, but if you could do one thing to help your companions, to help Battat, it'd be to put a mark on the Zapper.

A low, electronic groan ahead of you, in the depth of the darkness, beyond your vision, made it's way to your ears. You raised your pistol.

"I'm here. You wanted me, right?"

A low, whirring, electronic sound - but no words ever came.

You wouldn't have described it as loud; but it certainly wasn't quiet. Mechanical sounds, like the slow clunks of a robot coming to life sounded in the darkness ahead. You clipped the flashlight to your hood as you stepped forward, both hands now on your pistol.

"Come out," you tried to sound brave. "We don't have to fight, but... if it's a fight you want, I got it."

The sounds of metal scraping made you want to throw up. Too bad your stomach was empty.

Everything in you was screaming for you to run, but it was too late. You were already here - and it knew. It knew, and it'd been waiting for you. Maybe it targeted your best friend in hopes it'd lure you out... the thought was upsetting, but likely. Since it worked. You were here, looking for it.

Blue, red and white crawled out of a door much farther along down the hallway.

You knew it could teleport, but still, you waited to see what it did next. It's head stayed lowered, until the Zapper's head shot up at you. It tunneled violently towards you.

You fired twice - you weren't sure if you hit it in your panic. You ran, one hand grabbing your flashlight to keep it on you. If you dropped it now, you were as good as dead. If you weren't

already.

You leapt through a hole in the wall - and it barreled after you, crashing into the wall beyond as it skidded across the floor. You turned and fired again before running.

Fuck.

You hadn't eaten.

Or taken your medicine.

You were a fucking idiot.

It began using teleportation now - jumping ahead of you or blocking you into doorways, forcing you to fire again - you caught a glimpse of two bulletholes in its chest. You succeeded, no matter what happened to you, you succeeded. Your triumph was short lived as it grabbed at you again.

You leapt away, only for time to stop.

You blinked.

You couldn't move or see. A hand grabbed you, and launched you at the wall.

You landed, the decaying wall cracking and crumbling behind you.

You wheezed in pain. Somehow, you'd retained your iron grip on the flashlight and gun - you aimed up at the Zapper slowly making its way to you. It was most certainly not one you recognized, its buttons flashing wildly. Was it broken?

"You killed him, didn't you," you snarled.

It didn't answer. It didn't need to.

It lowered its head to fire at you. You raised your gun and fired twice before scrambling, only to be grabbed again. You kissed your teeth, refusing to drop your weapon.

It threw you again - thankfully, the wall was soft enough to not break any bones. Instead, your body crashed through it, landing with a heavy thump. You gasped for breath before standing again. It fired a shot at you - slamming you in the hip.

You shrieked, leg buckling from the sudden loss of balance. You fell to one knee, still defiantly glaring up at the Zapper.

"It doesn't... mattar... what you do... to me," you panted. "I already... won..."

Its electronic noises mimicked a laugh. You felt your own blood, damp against you.

It fired more shots at you, and you fired back - each shot lit up the Zapper. You'd definitely, at least, hit it a few times now. But it was hitting you, too.

Zappers could kill Pippinses in an instant. Anything longer than an instant was intended torture.

You knew it was toying with you, even now.

It zapped you again - stunning you into finally dropping your weapon. More bullets hit you, causing you to cry out. You got up to try to run, but you were bleeding, stumbling, getting weaker. It fully intended on weakening you to kill you.

The Zapper grabbed you again, pulling your body into the air, it's metal muscles rippling as it whipped you into the wall again. You let out a cry in pain as you slammed into the wall, and landed on the floor, wheezing.

The room was beginning to spin. You couldn't tell if it was getting dark, or if it was already dark. The slow, hopping figure of the imposing Zapper made it's way towards you as you laid on the ground, gasping in pain and shock.

This was it.

This was the end.

Your eyes grew heavy, and your head thunked against the floor.

A loud bang sounded, before everything went black.

Chapter 14: Confrontation II

He awoke, alone.

The kitchen light was the only illumination.

Where his red companion slept was empty. Normally, he'd have assumed they were in the washroom - but something didn't feel right. The air hung heavier.

"Cardinal...?" His voice asked, echoing off the living room walls. Silence.

He sat up and peered toward the bathroom.

The door was ajar - no lights on. Their bedroom was the same story. Something was not right.

He scrambled up, running to turn on the light. This wasn't right - Cardinal kept it somewhat of a secret, but he knew they didn't have the best vision. He'd connected the dots after the day he had to help them outside, when they got Greek food together weeks ago. They'd needed help seeing the steps - their depth perception was off. They always had a light on wherever they wandered. He knew it was because otherwise, they stumbled, bumped into things, swore. They could definitely see, but not well. Proximity and observation from constantly being around each other meant he noticed all these dumb little things, keeping notes. Most darkners could still, mostly, navigate fine in the darkness, just having a preference for turning on lights. Those with any sort of vision impairment, even mild, usually needed lights. The lack of lights tonight set a pit in his stomach he couldn't ignore. He ran back to push open the bathroom door.

Empty.

He ran to their room, to flick the light on - their pajamas were folded on their bed, as if they'd calculated this. Folding their clothes before leaving was an incredibly deliberate choice: they'd thought about this.

His heart sank.

He ran back to his room - he'd have even been fine if they were in there for whatever reason. He long stopped caring about that stupid rule he'd set on day one, about his room being off-limits, but they'd always respected it anyway.

Empty.

His head spun. What to do? What to do? Where...

He remembered Jongler's comment, about believing the Zapper to be in the basement. Oh, god. He prayed it wasn't true. This couldn't be happening. He had to keep it together.

He quickly got changed - he skipped the poncho, opting for an old jacket, a grey shirt, black pants. He'd need the breast pocket, he thought, clipping the flashlight he owned to it. He went to the closet, and reached for the shotgun. He'd already previously checked if it was loaded - he only had eight shots. He shuddered. What had he gotten himself into? What had Card done? Will he get to them in time?

He quickly put on his shoes as he did, he looked at the door again. Both of the inner locks were undone. His stomach sank. He should've looked here first, but he'd hoped they'd just be in the bathroom, curled up on their own bed, anything but gone Zapper-hunting.

He prayed they were by themself.

He'd rather look like a possessive psychopath than the alternative and finding them burnt to a crisp. He told himself he'd yell at them for this, he told himself he'd give them a good shake about it, spin their head and call them a stupid idiot - but he knew, he knew, he'd just crumble at the sight of them if they survived. He knew he probably wouldn't stay mad for long, if he even felt mad. He just felt sick with fear right now.

His hands shook as he flicked the lights off, and made his way down the dimly lit hall.

The faded "B" button in the elevator taunted him as he went down. He pulled his phone from his pocket, and tried to call Pluey.

No answer - the Shadowguy was asleep. He hung up and dialled again. This time, a sleepy, wobbly tune greeted him.

"Cardinal's gone," he flatly stated.

He pulled his phone away from his ear as he let the Shadowguy screech.

"I'm heading to the basement. Get Jongler. Yes, I am armed. I don't feel good about this. I'll see ya down there."

Firm tunes in agreement.

He clicked his phone off as the elevator got to its destination.

The old elevator doors whined as they opened. He could hear the sounds of a struggle. He walked quickly, flicking his flashlight on.

A gunshot.

More struggling sounds.

A loud crash.

Then...

Silence.

The small flashlight clipped to his breast pocket was his only means of visibility.

Dust particles fell like snowfall in front of him. Broken pipes hung from the ceiling, bits of decaying plaster and drywall sank loosely around him, threatening to fall if he moved too hastily. The faint, metallic thumps from pipes still struggling to breathe was all that could be heard alongside his shoes as they tapped on cold wooden floors, treading through the darkness.

Everything around him was decayed, rotten, falling apart. Darkness threatened to envelop everything: cold, unseeing, unfeeling. It was smothering.

The shotgun weighed heavy in his arms.

His heartbeat hammered in his chest - loud, heavy thumps, threatening to burst from his chest.

A bang, and then the sound of a loud crash.

He prayed that wasn't...

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

His footsteps were suddenly the only noise, he realized.

His flashlight hung to his old coat as if it, too, were scared.

Another sudden bang, and a crash. More gunshots.

He carried on, quickly. This place seemed to go on forever. The further he went, the more rotten it became. The hanging, broken pipes were rusted, formerly green wallpaper peeling and discoloured. Some walls were completely caved in, revealing flooded rooms with knocked over furniture. The only thing he could even pretend he recognized was the wallpaper, really. Ripped posters, vandalized bulletin boards, towers of old boxes, and cascades of fallen over boxes, VHS tapes spilling out of them.

He was quietly jogging now - praying for stealth and speed. He knew it could see him if it looked, but if he could take it off guard, he had a chance. He couldn't distinguish where the distant sounds of fighting came from, so he kept looking for visual cues - footprints, door handles with less dust, anything.

The only fresh thing, he noticed, were the signs of a struggle. A Pippins-shaped hole in the wall. He peered through with his light. No Pippins in that room. He opened the door. Signs of a fresh struggle - bullet holes in the walls. His hands trembled, noticing blood.

He stopped to listen for anything - and he heard it. It was moving, and quickly. The sound was distant, as if it didn't notice or care that he was there.

He ran towards it.

He saw them first, finally, laying on the floor as it approached them. They were heaving, struggling to breathe. They looked small, crumpled. The dark red and black clothing betrayed no signs of bleeding - but the red on their collar did. Their brow was furrowed in agony.

It picked them up, and threw them, before Battat could further analyze them.

They hit the wall with a cry of pain, landing awkwardly on the ground with a thick thud - the sound made him nauseous. They couldn't see him from where they lay, but their heavy panting still made its way to his ears. He raised his shotgun, wasting no time to put an end to this.

It was so engrossed in playing with its food, it hadn't even noticed him here, hopping slowly toward them as their head wobbled visibly and hit the floor with a thunk.

He fired.

The Zapper roared, seemingly in pain. It rushed toward him - he released another shot.

The shotgun, of course, was much more powerful than a little pistol. He wounded it good. It stumbled before roaring, lunging at him.

He ran, leading it away from Cardinal.

Don't be dead. Don't be dead. I found you - please don't be dead, don't let me be too late to save you, he thought frantically as he ran room to room, down the hallway, leading it away from the red Pippins he'd grown to love so fondly. I'll keep it away from you, I'll come back for you. Just stay alive. He let instinct carry him, guiding the metallic beast through the decayed maze, flying dust and moths obscuring his vision.

It violently crawled towards him - he turned, while running, and raised his heavy shotgun again. His back hit a wall, and he fired more in surprise of his body making contact with anything. It blasted it in the shoulder.

The Zapper roared again, firing bullets at him - the damage Cardinal had done to it was apparent. It was peppered in single bulletholes, and now the shotgun was really slowing it down. Its attacks were poorly aimed, messy, ripping holes in the walls and hitting wildly, no coordination or calculation behind its attacks.

"Fuck you," the green die hissed. He had 5 shots left. He had to make them count. He didn't have extra ammo.

He ducked away and ran to the next room, hissing as a bullet grazed him, ripping his jacket. Whatever, but the sting told him it broke through his flesh. It kept crawling towards him - slower, but every bit as menacing. He tucked behind the wall quickly, letting it enter the room before jogging to the corner, lifting the shotgun again. As it made its way to him, he ran around it, firing a shot into its backside, causing it to fall forward, catching itself with it's metallic, muscular arms.

It roared again.

Electronic sounds filled his ears - he winced in pain, surely this could rupture eardrums of darkners whose ears weren't hidden inside their heads. If it could hurt a Pippins, it would definitely wound anything with proper ears. It whipped around, firing both bullets and electricity his way. He ducked to side, grunting as bullets grazed him again, but nothing devastating landing. He was playing with his luck, and luck was on his side. He dipped out of the room, luring it back into the hallway - narrower spaces meant an easier shot, he figured.

As it came out, he fired at the shoulder again, and it sent a thunderbolt his way. He gasped in pain, but stayed standing. He wasn't sure how, but he wasn't going to waste it.

Another shot.

He had 3 shots left.

He stumbled into another room, and chewed on a dark candy. He felt a bit of energy pulse through him, making it easier to move again. He popped another into his mouth, and kept moving.

He exhaled quickly, before moving to kick open the door to a joined room.

"Come get me, asshole!" He shouted behind him.

It barreled after him, pink and yellow discoloured buttons flashing wildly as it targeted him. He ran before spinning around, firing another shot.

A miss.

Fuck.

2 more shots left.

These two can't miss. He kept jogging - he was outpacing it. He wondered if Cardinal had disabled its teleportation somehow; it hadn't used it once, when it could've used it, easily, multiple times, instead of taking five shotgun blasts from a Pippins. They had to have disabled it. Some of its chest buttons were shot, or maybe it was weakened more than it was letting on.

This was terrifying, however. One shotgun blast could kill most darkners, nevermind five. This thing was a moving tank, taking blast after blast and still moving. Even as it began slowing down, it was powerful. The floor shook every time it barreled his way - it must be a deliberate choice, he concluded, to make it easier to throw the Pippin off-balance to attack. It must not have anticipated another Pippins coming with a shotgun, though.

He had a sick idea. He turned, letting the Zapper get close and aimed the shotgun again. These can't miss.

It got upright as it prepared to swing at him - he aimed square for the chest. He could see cavernous holes where he'd blasted it - every little hole his love left as they'd struggled. They had marked the Zapper - the murderous creature a board of thumbtack holes for all he cared. He fired.

It roared, falling to its hands and knees... knee? He was going to assume knees. It shuddered from the gaping hole the green die laid into its chest. He aimed for the head, and quickly. This was his only shot left.

A deafening bang.

It collapsed, the hole in its head still smoking.

He shuddered. Was it dead?

He stood there, for what felt like forever. It stopped moving. He could hear the distant sounds of footsteps rushing towards him. He kicked it once.

It didn't move.

"Are you finally dead?" he hissed between pants, kicking it again, and again, and again. He swore and cursed at it as he struggled to finally catch his breath, still landing heavy kick after

kick to its unmoving head.

"Fuck you," he snarled. Hitting it again and again. "Terrorizing Card, burning them, throwing them like a ragdoll," he raised his shotgun. "Nobody will miss you." He beat its corpse with the heavy, but now empty firearm.

A low whistle snapped him out of it.

"Pluey," he exhaled. "You're late." His words were stern, but carried no anger to his shadowy companion.

"Boss..." Jongler warily approached. "Where's Card'nal?"

"Can you... not see them?"

"I can see through walls," Jongler started slowly. "But this place is too big for me... our vision only extends past one wall for smaller darkners, like youse..."

He sighed with a long shudder. "Can you two do me a favour?"

"Of course, boss."

"Dispose of this. Make sure it can never be revived. Bury it, burn it, take it apart, I don't care. I'll go find Cardinal, take them home, but you guys... get this thing out my sight, and bury it. Nobody can know what happened here."

"On it, boss."

"I'll go find Cardinal," he repeated. "Please... don't follow me."

"Of course, boss. Come on, Plues."

Pluey gave Battat a single pat on the back before joining Jongler.

He tossed the shotgun to the side, and walked off.

Battat left his best friends to go find the red Pippins. It was more dusty than before - all the fighting and struggling caused it to stir, flying wildly in the air like a blizzard. He wasn't sure how he managed to fight and kill a Zapper in these conditions, but his asthma was inflamed. He could feel phlegm building up in his chest, coughing into his inner elbow. He treaded onward.

Gah. He got so lost in the maze of the basement, leading the Zapper away, that he lost his red.

His red.

He finally caught sight of them, breaking into a sprint. He fell to his knees, and scooted closer to them, quickly.

They were unconscious, but still breathing. They looked as peaceful as ever, despite the warm, damp clothing betraying their injuries.

"You... you idiot," he breathed.

He held the red Pippins in his arms tightly, not caring if they got blood on him. He stood back up, and reached under both of their arms in an attempt to pick them up.

They were heavy - and he was wounded himself. He hoped he wouldn't have to drag them - not only would that make a huge mess, but the idea of them being in any further discomfort unsettled him. But he managed to lift them by their arms, and swivelled them to press his back into their chest, wrapping their arms around his neck. He stayed in a crouch, hoping it'd keep them on him for a few moments longer as he let go to quickly reach for their thighs. He grabbed them and wrapped them around his hips. Battat awkwardly jumped to readjust them on his back.

He let out a little cough from the weight. It mattered not - his red was alive, and he could take them home.

He took a couple steps, cautiously, feeling how much he could handle carrying another full grown Pippins on his back. Their soft breaths tickled his neck. A sensation he hoped he never loses again. He wobbled a bit. Adrenaline still kept him standing, at least. He was relieved the flashlight loyally clung to his chest - it still felt like seeing through a blizzard of moths and dust. But he eventually found his way back to the stairs in the sea of darkness, dust, and decay.

He paused to listen. Only very, very faint dragging and popping noises in the distance.

Pluey and Jongler were doing their jobs.

He made his way up the steps, incredibly slowly, carefully. One wrong move and he'd fall back with Cardinal. It took longer than he'd like to admit.

The elevator ride felt like forever. His red's slow, weak, but consistent breathing kept him steady.

They were going home.

"It's over now," he murmured. "You're safe. I'll take care of you. Just... please wake up soon."

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!